

Back Stage!! Vol. 1

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1

Chapter 1

“It’s gotten a little colder...” Rei whispered with a small sigh.

The temperatures changes this year had been severe, like today, when even a suit couldn’t stave off the cold. Though admittedly, there had been times recently when, during the day, wearing a jacket was too hot. The fluctuating weather made it hard to keep oneself healthy.

8:50 AM

As usual, Rei left his house and started walking toward his employer’s office at SenaPro. It was only a 5-minute walk from his apartment to the office, and despite his complaints about the heat and cold, he’d be inside in short order. The walk wasn’t stressing, especially considering that he didn’t have to deal with the commuter’s traffic rush, which was particularly bad around his area. Not only that, but as an upstanding, working man, Rei considered the closeness of his place of work as a benefit to his living arrangements.

People who preferred keeping their private lives and work separate might have a hard time understanding that sentiment...though recently, Rei had been thinking that he might do better to put a bit more distance between the two as well. With these thoughts in his head, Rei opened the door to the office.

“Ah, Sagara-san. Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Rei returned the greeting of the other office staff as he went straight to his chair and turned on his computer. As he waited for the machine to start up, Rei checked the schedule written in his notebook, then set to work replying to his emails after the desktop had loaded.

A few email replies later, Rei finished with his computer, powered it down, and stood up. “I’m off to the residence. If something comes up, you can reach me at my cell,” Rei called out to the office staff and headed out a different door from that which he’d come in by—to enter the Sena family’s living quarters.

As the name suggested, SenaPro was a personal management company owned and run by the Senas, a family of many famous talents. The family’s area was connected to the business office on the first floor.

“Good morning,” Rei said to Nagisa and Seiya as he entered the living room while they enjoyed a late breakfast. The table, decorated with a vase of fresh flowers, was overlooked by a huge French window. The sparkling married couple, the picture of perfect contentment, sat at their table as though posed for a commercial of some kind. Rei, however was unfazed by the scene after such a long association with the family, and in fact, took it as quite an ordinary part of his daily routine.

The person closest to Rei as he sat down was Sena Nagisa, one of Japan’s foremost female actresses. Thanks to her modeling roots, she appeared much younger than she really was. At first glance, it appeared as though Seiya and she had married years apart, but in truth,

Nagisa was not young—she was actually even older than Seiya himself.

“Good morning, Rei-kun,” Sena Seiya replied to his greeting. Getting his start in musical theatre, the head of the family, Seiya, was a big-time singer. Well-known in the past for his performances in the incredibly popular end-of-the-year ballad show, Seiya had started in the producing line of work as SenaPro’s company president.

Seiya’s father was an American and his mother Japanese, gifting him with more defined features and lighter coloring than many full-Japanese performers. It was perhaps because of his background that the years showed more strongly on him than his wife. But, throughout Japan, the couple was to this very day still popular with both young and old, male and female fans alike. The pair was still overflowing with so much ability and multiple talents that they had been able to start and maintain their own production business.

While their marriage had ostensibly happened on the heels of Nagisa’s relentless pursuit of Seiya after going to see one of his musicals and falling in love with him at first sight, Seiya, too, had fallen head over heels with the beauty touted as Japan’s foremost actress the moment he’d laid eyes on her. Their fans therefore naturally had no complaints over the match, such a fine couple they made. Such outstanding people couldn’t possibly be found anywhere else, so Rei thought daily.

And this didn’t even take their personalities into account, as they were practically angelic in their level of kindness and generosity. To have picked up someone like him and groomed him to handle such an important job... To Rei, Seiya was his savior, the most important benefactor in his life.

“Now, about today’s schedule. Seiya-san, you have a planning meeting this afternoon. We’ll be leaving at 2 PM, so please be ready by then. And Nagisa-san...” Rei glanced up at Nagisa while he read, “You have the day off.”

“What? Today, too??”

‘Well, of course’, was Rei’s immediate urge to respond to the complaint, feeling a tic in his cheek spasm in frustration. “That’s because you declined that offer for the drama series, Nagisa-san...”

She’d been offered a role for an oft-viewed channel’s 10 PM television drama, broadcast all over the country, with a veteran director and popular new cast. Everyone could see that the program was eager to have Sena Nagisa on board to boost the program’s ratings; it had been an ideal opportunity for all parties involved.

“But none of the actors stood out!”

Nagisa had rejected the drama offer point blank after that outburst. However, Rei has already adjusted her schedule to make room for the drama appearances, meaning that now Nagisa’s schedule was full of blank spaces with no work.

As Rei saw it, Nagisa was a victim of reaping what you sow in this sort of situation, and complaining to him wasn’t going to help. But Nagisa, as though she had the right, pursed her lips in a displeased pout.

“It’s like all the actors out there nowadays just don’t feel fresh, or like I’ve already performed with them somewhere.”

“Well, that may be...” Rei conceded, though it wasn’t as though there weren’t young actors that the actress hadn’t performed within this particular production. Nagisa wasn’t in the least impressed with any of them and barely gave them a thought, so low was her opinion. However, as Nagisa’s performance history was quite long, it was becoming hard to find any actors that she hadn’t performed with at some point or another. At her age, this was especially within the ranks of veteran actors. However, Rei knew that bringing up the subject of age was tantamount to inviting the wrath of his client, who was already self-conscious about the subject.

“Then, for my future reference, Nagisa-san, do you have any actors that you’re particularly interested in working with?” Of course, even if she did have a preference, there was no telling whether finding work with that actor would even be possible. However, if it meant getting Nagisa to perform in their productions, most TV networks and movie companies wouldn’t mind being asked to pull a few strings to make her wishes come true. If he just sent out the request, though, it may not be soon, but eventually Nagisa would definitely be able to act with the performer of her choice.

Then, if a job with the actor became available, Nagisa could work happily and avoid the current problem of large gaps of nothing to do. To avoid betraying Seiya and Nagisa’s trust, Rei held himself to the standard of never making the same mistake twice.

“The person I want to work with is... Oh, what was his name again?” Nagisa tilted her head in a cute, considering manner, making Rei wonder if the actor was really all that popular, considering she couldn’t even remember his name.

“Ah! Him, him! That’s the guy!!” Nagisa exclaimed while pointing a finger at the TV screen.

“Uh...” Rei was instantly at a loss for words after he moved his gaze toward the commercial. The reason being that the person in the commercial was none other than *Ichijou Ryouma*, the current extremely popular rising acting star of the day.

There was no way.

Ichijou Ryouma’s schedule had to have been booked solid for *ages* already. Much as Nagisa wanted to perform with him, that was definitely not going to be happening in the foreseeable future.

“Kyaa! Oh, he’s just so cool, don’t you think?” Rei let out an unintentional sigh as Nagisa pointed at the TV, bubbling at Seiya for confirmation of her opinion, who, of course, innocently agreed.

“...Morning...” Rei heard a lack-luster murmur and glanced up to see its source. There, recently arrived in the living room from the second floor, was Izumi. This, too, was a common scene.

Izumi was the Sena family’s second and youngest son. He’d started university just the previous spring, although you wouldn’t know that he’d just begun an exciting new chapter of his life given the rather depressing aura he emitted. His facial features were quite obviously of the Sena family blood—cute like an idol, though with his unfashionable glasses and hairstyle, it was all going to waste. On top of that, he was a shut-in, totally immersed in his weird anime (LalaLulu or LuluLala or whatever). In other words, a *total otaku*. He had a timid personality, or rather—he was meek-seeming in public and haughty at home. Perhaps thanks to his spoiled upbringing, he could also be a bit stubborn at times.

In addition, even though he was a college student, he still had a naive and selfish outlook about the world, proclaiming, even at his age, that he wanted to be a manga artist. Rei had seen Izumi’s art many times over the years and he never seemed to improve, always producing art that looked as though it could have been drawn by an elementary school student. In any case, he was nowhere near the level needed to be a manga artist.

Born into such a family, how on earth did Izumi end up like this, Rei had to wonder. At this rate, Rei was honestly worried that the boy would become a reclusive, jobless layabout after graduating, if things continued as they were. But, no matter how close Rei was to the family, as he was nearly considered one of their own, he did not feel that it was his place to voice such an opinion regarding their private matters.

Granted, if Rei felt there was something he could do for Izumi, given that he was Seiya’s son, Rei wanted to assist him as much as he could. It was just...

“Darling? I want to act with him!”

“I’m sure Rei will pull it off somehow, dear.”

Rei was brought out of his reverie suddenly at Seiya’s words to Nagisa as they both turned to face him. “Please don’t ask for the impossible, Mr. President! There’s no way that Ichijou Ryouma is available right now!” Even if it was a request from his benefactor and even if it was for the sake of that benefactor’s beloved wife, impossibilities were, of course, impossible! Rei had to get his point across to avoid any unrealistic expectations.

“Nagisa-san, really...”

“Oh, look, look! It’s Shougo!!”

Please, be reasonable, Rei had intended to say when he was cut off by Nagisa pointing at the TV screen again.

Rei went silent. The person now appearing on the TV was the eldest son of the Sena family, Shougo. At twenty-five years of age, Shougo was seven years older than his little brother Izumi. As the vocalist and song-writer of the popular rock band the ‘CRUSHERZ,’ Shougo had skyrocketed into the place of SenaPro’s biggest breadwinner. On top of that, with his cheerful personality, Shougo made frequent appearances on talk shows as well. His popularity was firmly fixed with both young and old, male and female fans alike, much like his parents.

“.....” At the sight of Shougo standing at center stage, bathed in bright lights as he sang with that stunning voice of his, Rei unthinkingly inhaled sharply.

Given his handsome features and loads of talent, popularity, and saleability...Rei should by all accounts have absolutely no qualms with such a performer. In actuality, however, Rei was involved with Shougo in...many ways—more than simply as a face in their production company; indeed, more than anyone else in his life at the moment.

It wasn’t that he *hated* Shougo or just couldn’t deal with him; it was simply that, when it came to Shougo...well, there was a lot of extra *baggage* to consider with regards to what they were to each other.

“By the way, Izumi! Have you been going to see that voice trainer that I introduced you to lately?”

“Er...”

“Yes, and Johnny-san has told me that you’re welcome any time for those dance lessons we talked about earlier!”

“Uh...”

Glancing from the man on the TV screen back to their other underachieving son seated at the table, the two parents started voicing their own thoughts about the boy, turning to Izumi, who had almost finished his breakfast, and immediately starting in on him together.

At suddenly being put on the spot, Izumi’s face took on a bewildered expression when the topic switched to himself. He grew pale, clearly worried that they’d find out that he hadn’t been to voice training classes or dance lessons. His eyes darted back and forth, wondering what to do and likely unable to think of an excuse on such short notice.

“You’re eighteen years old already, dear! How long are you going to continue talking about this anime or what have you—” Nagisa began.

“Oh, would you look at the time! I gotta go!” Unable to withstand any more censure, Izumi made an extremely see-through excuse to cut off his mother’s sermon. He then pushed the chair back with a clatter and stood up. “I’m off!”

"Wait just a—oh, he got away!" Nagisa yelled after the boy as he sprinted out of the living room with more speed and agility than one would think possible from such a sedentary person, though whether or not he'd heard the parting shot at all was debatable.

"Really, now... will that boy ever make something of himself? He seems to be becoming a little otaku-ish, if you ask me..." Nagisa finished, letting out a small sigh.

"There's no 'ish' about it..." Rei unthinkingly responded to Nagisa's rare show of motherly concern. *Beep, beep, beep*, Rei's cell phone went off, cutting off the conversation. He answered with a standard greeting, "Hello, this is Sagara from SenaPro."

"Ah, thanks for all your help in the past, this is Asou from Hakutsuu Agency," came the voice from the other end of the line.

"Oh, our thanks to you as well," Rei returned, recognizing the name. Hakutsuu Agency was a large advertising recruitment company that often worked in conjunction with SenaPro and its actors.

"I was wondering if you could you spare a moment of your time, Sagara-san?"

"Yes, please continue." Judging by the formality with which the man on the phone was talking, Rei figured this must be some sort of lucrative work they'd be getting and made sure to reply with all proper civility.

"My apologies for the abruptness of the question, but do you happen to know the wedding magazine 'Happy Wedding'?" Asou continued their conversation.

"Ah, yes, I've heard of it," he replied reflexively, searching his brain for what he knew of the magazine. He then remembered that a fairly long time ago, Seiya and Nagisa had done a commercial for them advertising their first issue.

"Well, you see, this year actually marks their tenth year in business."

"Oh, ten years already?" At Asou's words, the old, televised commercial began playing vividly in Rei's mind. He saw Seiya in his tuxedo and Nagisa in her wedding dress—then the performers playing the little boy and girl who caught the bouquet that Nagisa threw. Just a few short seconds of film.

The commercial had been made at the height of their popularity. Seiya and Nagisa—such a beautiful couple was rarely seen, much less in a commercial, and in the blink of an eye, they became the hot topic among gossip circles. Rei recalled hearing that the magazine had sold out of several printings thanks to that publicity wave.

Come to think of it, hadn't Izumi been in that...?

"Indeed, and to commemorate their tenth year in business, 'Happy Wedding' has been talking about creating a new commercial revolving around the concept '10 years later.' That is, if Seiya-san and Nagisa-san might be available...?" Asou trailed off meaningfully.

"Ah, I see," Rei made a non-committal confirmation, knowing that this was definitely something he'd have to consider.

A commemorative commercial after ten years... If they used Seiya-san and Nagisa-san for the roles again after all this time, business ploy or not, the flames of jealousy and intrigue surrounding such a famously successful romance and marriage would be rekindled in practically everyone who witnessed the advertisement. It could prove the chance to increase the magazine's reader base among young adults by promoting the couple's obvious wedded bliss, and those readers of the same age as Seiya and Nagisa, with children around a marriageable age, might also start subscribing to the magazine. It was a great marketing strategy worthy of such a well-known advertising recruitment company—as expected from Hakutsuu Agency.

Not to mention, it certainly couldn't hurt SenaPro's business either.

Even with Nagisa so picky about the jobs she'd deign to accept, with Seiya set to perform at her side, there was no way she'd refuse. In fact, she'd probably be *ecstatic* at the prospect.

"However, there is one condition with this commercial offer..."

"Oh?" Finding that he'd gotten a little carried away thinking about the benefits of accepting the offer, with some trepidation Rei turned his attention back to the phone conversation at hand.

"Regarding this plan, we'd like the same little girl that Nagisa-san brought in before as a last-minute replacement to reprise her role. However, we don't know her name and were therefore hoping that SenaPro could get in contact with her, if possible."

"Uh...!" Rei's eyebrows flew up in response to Asou's words.

The little girl... Which meant...

"Is the actress' schedule too full at the moment? My client really is adamant about having her in the commercial, so if there's anything you can do...?"

"Well, you see..." The schedule wasn't the problem. In fact, Rei wished that the problem were with the schedule. As it stood, the problem was with the performer *'her'*'self.

"Asou-san, by 'client,' to whom exactly are you referring? 'Happy Wedding' Publishing, or...?"

"Ah, no, actually..." Asou floundered for an answer.

"I find it more than a little odd that your client would place such a high priority on us accepting *that* particular condition over any guarantee of the performance of our company's actors, Seiya and Nagisa—don't you?" Rei, trying to escape the current topic of conversation without Asou inquiring too deeply into the 'girl,' stalled giving a more definitive answer by insisting on further information about the other man's client.

After a moment of silence, Asou's defeated voice responded through the telephone receiver, "... *My apologies for being so roundabout. In actuality, my client is that little girl's counterpart actor from the previous commercial, Ichijou Ryouma.*"

"What? Ichijou Ryouma?!" Upon hearing the name of the other actor, Rei unconsciously started, his eyes going wide. "Is this true?"

"Yes, very true. I was surprised, as well... But his condition for accepting this role is that we not change the actors from ten years ago. He has said that no matter what, he wants to act with the same little girl as before. However, the only thing we have to go on in our search for her is that he remembers she had a very peculiar eye color as a defining feature. I'm afraid he's quite serious in his request. His schedule is booked completely full, but if we can somehow fulfill his condition, he said that he would find a way to make an opening."

"Is that...so...?"

"Would SenaPro consider it? Please?" Asou pleaded.

"...I suppose so..." Rei conceded haltingly. There might just be something promising to this idea, actually... With such astounding timing, Rei had to wonder if this was all due to Nagisa's impressive dumb luck, or really just a simple coincidence after all... "Supposing we can respond positively, by when should we give our answer?"

"I apologize for the rush, but could we request a response by tomorrow evening? Ichijou Ryouma's schedule is, as I said, quite packed, so our of consideration for his situation..."

"Tomorrow evening, correct? ...I understand. Until then," Rei replied with a note of finality.

"We hope to hear back favorably."

"Thank you, excuse me." Finished with his call, Rei turned back to the two at the table. "It seems that we may be able to do something about your wish to work with Ichijou Ryouma after all."

"What?! Really?!" Nagisa squealed excitedly.

"Oh my, well speak of the devil!" Seiya responded in kind.

"However, there is one major obstacle..." Prefacing the explanation so as to prepare Nagisa—who was already in a fit of happiness thinking the situation decided—and her ever-composed husband Seiya, Rei proceeded to relate the phone conversation he'd just finished. "Do you happen to remember the commercial you two were in 10 years ago promoting the magazine 'Happy Wedding'?"

"It was an informational magazine for wedding planning, if memory serves me. Nagisa looked so wonderful in that wedding dress that I remember it quite well, actually," Seiya replied wistfully.

"Oh darling, you big silly!"

Not interrupting Seiya's praise of his wife, nor Nagisa's happiness, Rei then proceeded to explain about 'Happy Wedding's current 10th year of publication and their plans for a revival commercial revolving around their original advertisement involving the two of them.

"And so, you have been offered a role in their new commercial."

"Oh, I see! So? What does that have to do with Ichijou Ryouma?" Nagisa asked, eyes sparkling at the idea.

"Do you remember the young boy that appeared in the same commercial? As it turns out, that boy was Ichijou Ryouma himself."

"Eeh?!" Nagisa said, incredulous.

"Oh my, well that is a coincidence, isn't it?" Seiya rejoined, mildly surprised.

"Yes, quite," Rei nodded deeply, unthinkingly agreeing with Seiya's opinion. To think that Ichijou Ryouma would have been the child actor that Sena Seiya and Nagisa had performed with in the past! He supposed that these sorts of bizarre coincidences really did happen on occasion. Despite having worked so hard to be of use to Seiya as the manager of his business and still to have not realized such a thing, though, was something Rei was chagrined to admit. "But, as I said before, there is one problem with this situation," Rei plowed on with the explanation.

"What would that be?"

"The condition set forth by Ichijou Ryouma to get him to agree to appear in this commercial...is that we keep the same cast from ten years ago," Rei explained with a grave set to his lips.

Nagisa looked at him in confusion, tilting her head in puzzled manner. "But that's not such a problem, is it? I'll do it! And you will, too,

won't you darling?"

"Of course, dear. But still..."

"Exactly," Rei continued, seeing that Seiya seemed to understand the issue at hand. "The problem is the 'little girl actress.'"

"Oh, that's right!" Nagisa finally reached the same conclusion they all had with a wide-eyed blink of her beautiful eyes. "That little girl was played by *Izumi*, wasn't it?"

"Uh..." Rei let out an involuntary sigh at Nagisa's rather belated realization. Of course, this was the big issue.

Ten years ago, while shooting for the commercial, the actress that was supposed to catch the bride's bouquet had proven unable to arrive in time due to a rescheduled flight. As a last-minute replacement, Izumi had been brought in as a stand-in, as he had happened to be on set at the time. But that had been then, and this was *now*—in this day and age, the notion of having Izumi reprise his role was ludicrous! Izumi was a boy—and not just a boy, but *such* a boy! A gloomy otaku, who—due to his own mistake during filming that last time—had come to despise the celebrity world. There was absolutely no way that he'd say yes if asked to put on women's clothes and appear in another commercial!

But, aside from Ichijou Ryouma's request, there were also now the wishes of Nagisa and Seiya to take into account. They all wanted to make this chance a reality, and not least of all because of the useful connections they would garner if they could pull it off.

"For the moment, I suppose that I should try to reason with Izumi-san once he gets home..." Rei eventually gave in.

"Yay! I get to act with Ryouma!"

"Isn't that wonderful, Nagisa?" ...Damn. Nagisa-san was already fully expecting to be able to work with Ryouma again. "Rei, we're counting on you."

"...Yes, of course," was all that Rei could respond with when confronted with such a completely-trusting, smiling Seiya, much as he felt put on the spot with expectations. He had a feeling that a conversation with that shut-in Izumi wouldn't be easy. What to do, what to do...?

However, looking at the two smiling people near him, Rei sighed again at the oddly difficult feeling he felt at the situation...

Later that night...

"A commercial offer?!" Izumi's voice rose in a wild cry of disbelief. Rei had tried to broach the subject about the current situation to Izumi in the living room the moment he'd come back home from his day at school.

"For who?! **ME**! What are you talking about?! Are you *insane*?!" Izumi tripped over his words in his rush to get them out, while Rei merely shook his head calmly at the insinuation against his mental health.

"I'm *not* insane, and there's a reason that this offer has come to you specifically. First, take a look at this." Rei produced here the video tape he'd found after scouring in the SenaPro materials room. As the film began, the figures of Nagisa and Seiya from 10 years ago appeared on the screen. Clothed in their respective wedding dress and tuxedo, they stood before the doors to the chapel, accepting well-wishes and congratulations from their guests. Nagisa, almost frighteningly the same as she had been depicted 10 years ago, threw the wedding bouquet in an impressive arc straight into the arms of a charming little girl. Then the girl and the little boy next to her shared a happy smile together.

"*No matter the age, here's to a wonderful wedding! Happy Wedding Magazine's First Publication!*" shortly after the narration finished, Rei pressed the pause button on the video.

"Th—this is from 10 years ago..." the younger Sena son admitted shakily.

"Precisely!" adjusting the bridge of his glasses before nodding vigorously at Izumi, who seemed to be stuck staring at the screen, Rei contemplated the person before him. That the charming little girl on the TV screen had become this gloomy, otaku college student standing before him in just 10 short years... It was a hard truth to swallow, but with the help of Seiya and Nagisa's impressive genealogy, it kind of made sense. His looks had never been in question. As a child, Izumi had been beautiful enough to impress anyone, wherever he might go. At the same time, however, looking at the Izumi projected on screen as compared to the one in front of him, Rei honestly believed that the other had a graceful air and refined look about him. If Izumi had really wanted to become an idol, by now he surely would have gone far.

No, it still wasn't too late to start! Rei was sure of it.

"The sponsor of this commercial, 'Happy Wedding,' is commemorating its tenth year of business by filming another commemorative TV spot. And the concept is ... 'Ten Years Later.' The setting is ten years after the original wedding ceremony, this time with the little kids that caught the bouquet themselves tying the knot," Rei resumed.

"W—wait just a minute!!" Izumi stopped Rei's rapid-fire explanation. His bewilderment was understandable under the circumstances, but that didn't account for the hint of amazement that seemed mixed in with his expression. "But I don't actually have to be in this, right? Like if they found some similar-looking girl to play me instead?" Honestly, Izumi spoke as though Rei hadn't already considered that. If only they could...

"I had the same opinion, however..." Rei unconsciously sighed again while rewinding the video tape. He then paused it at the scene of Izumi smiling radiantly at the other small boy and explained about the aforementioned request that the 'actress from ten years ago remain unchanged'—and how, as luck would have it, this request was being posed by the actor who played the young boy, his sole condition for

accepting the job in the first place.

“B—but… there’s no way he’d know that it’s really me. Someone else could…” Swallowing the surprise that the little boy was *the Ichijou Ryouma*, Izumi pressed his opinion. He obviously really didn’t want to do it. Rei knew that he *could*, but convincing him of that was another matter entirely.

“Ryouma remembers that the girl had ‘oddly colored eyes,’ so…” Rei sighed yet again and glanced back at the TV pointedly. It was hard to tell from the 10-year-old video tape quality, but even so, it was still visible on the screen. Izumi, like his older brother Shougo, had quite strangely colored eyes, possibly due to the fact that they had foreign blood accounting for a quarter of their lineage. And, given Asou’s words from that afternoon, Ryouma definitely remembered that *specific* fact. If not for that detail, someone else could have easily been used in Izumi’s stead; however…

“Please look at Nagisa-san’s excitement. We can’t back out now. I beseech you, please accept the offer, Izumi-san,” Rei implored with finality, gesturing to Nagisa behind them, bouncing around and hardly able to contain her joy.

“Wait just a—!” It seemed that Izumi was not to be persuaded, no matter what tactic Rei employed to get him to see reason. He furrowed his eyebrows and scowled at Rei, loudly protesting, “Aren’t you all forgetting something?! I’m a *boy*!! We might have been able to fool them 10 years ago, but now…”

Rei drew in close to get a good look at the protesting Izumi. He checked his height and figure, patting his much shorter head and flat chest just to make sure. Yes, just as he’d thought, there shouldn’t be any problem.

“You’ll be just fine. With that short stature and delicate form, you’ll easily pass—and be quite the hottie, at that,” Rei was quick to reassure Izumi of his still rather feminine appearance.

“Shut up!!” While Rei had intended the comment to be taken as an encouragement, hoping that with his fears allayed, Izumi would finally give his consent, instead the younger man’s face contorted into a petulant look, pending tears, before shouting, “Enough! I’m going to bed!!”

“Please wait!” Rei called frantically to Izumi, who had turned on his heels in anger. Distressed and fearing that if he let the boy leave like this, he’d *never* agree. He needed Izumi’s answer by tomorrow! With Izumi off at college most of the day, he needed to get his consent here and now. “This commercial could be your big chance—an opportunity to finally break into the entertainment industry…!” Rei tried once more.

“I told you—!” Izumi spun around, pouting with an immovably antagonistic set to his mouth, “—I don’t *want* to get into something like *celebrity* work! I absolutely can’t perform in front of other people!” he finished, spitting out the words in anger.

And *that* set him off. This time Rei was the one to square his shoulders and shout back, “Then what exactly do you plan on doing with your future?! With a degree from a third-rate college and no ability to talk to anyone with your gloomy, otaku personality—at this rate, you won’t even be able to be a normal office worker!!” Izumi’s tone while talking about ‘something like *celebrity* work’ raised Rei’s hackles; how dare he adopt such a dismissive attitude toward something so important to the Sena family!

At Rei’s unthinkingly severe tone while reproaching, Izumi flinched. “I—I’m going to become a manga artist…!”

“A manga artist?!” Despite Izumi’s recoil, Rei was so worked up by now you could practically *hear* his restraint finally snapping as he flung back his reply. “There’s no way you’ll become a manga artist with crappy art that looks like it was drawn with your left hand! Don’t underestimate the pressures of being a working adult making a living!” After getting that off his chest, Rei raised his gaze to Izumi’s, who stood there, too startled at what Rei had said to react immediately.

“… Crappy art…?!” he whispered, body starting to tremble slightly.

“Oh, no… I didn’t mean, I…!” Rei pressed a hand to his mouth frantically, but it was impossible to take back his words now that they were already out there. Izumi’s eyes shone with tears, poetically twinkling as they threatened to spill down his cheeks.

“Stupid, stupid, *stupid* Rei!!! I’ll never do that commercial now!! Just go and die, Rei!” Izumi burst out in a loud, emotional shout and cried all the way back out of the living room.

“Now I’ve done it…!” Rei cursed his lack of sense, leaving him saying anything that popped into his head. His sincerity hardly mattered at this point, since he knew that he’d taken his outburst a bit too far. In the past, there’d been a time when he was incredibly quick to anger. Usually he went to great pains to seem as intelligent and well-bred as possible, from his physical presentation down to his polite way of speaking, but when provoked to emotional responses, his true breeding showed.

In any case, he knew that nothing more he could say would make Izumi budge on the subject of this commercial. It was little surprise, really, given how he’d been broadsided by the sudden offer for a commercial appearance. There was nothing more to be done for it now, though, and he had honestly thought it was a long-shot to begin with anyway.

“Huh? But what about Ryouma?!” Rei gulped at Nagisa’s cry. “No way, no way!! I wanna act with Ryoumaaa!” she continued, well on her way to a tantrum.

“Oh, please don’t cry!” her husband coddled.

‘*Oh right*’, Rei internally sighed. Nagisa had seen how that conversation with her son had gone, so he’d thought that surely she must see

that it was impossible, just as Rei himself had... What a foolishly naive thought. But how to console her, in case she didn't understand?

"Don't worry! I'm sure that Rei will think of something!"

"Huh?!" At Seiya's unthinking words, Rei jolted and his eyes grew wide. "Think of something?" That was much more easily said than done, as Rei knew that, with Izumi in such as state, there was literally nothing he could do on his own. Nothing, and yet...

"Right, Rei-kun?"

"I—I..." That smile. When faced with that smile, even in the face of such an outrageous expectation, Rei swallowed back his incredulous refusal. Not that he had to be reminded, but Seiya *was* Rei's benefactor. From the beginning, he'd never stood a chance against that smile. If Seiya wanted something to be done about Nagisa's predicament, then it was Rei's job to make sure that something was, in fact, done.

But still...

"I understand. I'll try to persuade him further." Rei found, for the first time when faced with that smile, that he was unable to give his whole-hearted reassurance to Seiya, so hopeless did he believe the situation.

"Really?!" In an instant, Nagisa's face lit up and Rei felt the pressure on him redouble, knowing that, one way or another, he would have to make this work. He just had to pull out all the tricks at his disposal.

"I'll take my leave for today... And, I'm very sorry for blowing up and saying such rude things to Izumi-san earlier..." Rei tried to apologize.

"Oh, don't worry about that. We know you're just trying to look out for our Izumi," the Sena parents agreed. Reassured by those words, Rei finished his goodbyes for the time being and left the living area. During his walk toward the office, he sighed while traversing the hall.

"...Guess there's nothing for it... I don't like owing him favors, but...I'll call one in this time." Rei mumbled to himself. And so, reaching the deserted office, Rei pulled out his phone and punched in the numbers for Shougo's cell. Despite Izumi's general impression on first glance, he was definitely a coddled little brother, and even when he would stubbornly refuse to see reason when lectured by others, Shougo had always been able to get his younger brother to listen to him. Even so, Rei had made Izumi pretty angry this time, and it was a difficult subject to breach with the boy in the first place, so Rei doubted that even Shougo talking to him would make all that much of a difference anyway...

"*Hey there!*" Shougo's ever-chipper voice answered, cutting into the ringing of the phone pressed to his ear. It sounded to Rei as though Shougo was out and about, as he could catch the sound of several people in the background.

"What are you doing now?" Rei wanted to check.

"I'm in the middle of a recording~!" Damn, what bad timing. Shougo's current manager, Sotomura, along with another manager for the record company backing Shougo's group, CRUSHERZ, were in charge of the man's schedule. Therefore, Rei didn't have a very clear handle on Shougo's daily workload. He mused that it might be a good idea to at least take some note of Shougo's schedule in the future; however, it was his policy to think of Shougo as little as he could possibly manage, so he'd entrusted the management of Shougo's schedule to Sotomura.

"Should I call you back?"

"*If it won't take long, it's totally fine!*" Shougo replied to Rei's inquiry brightly.

Shougo's idea of 'totally fine' had a tendency not to coincide with others', but if he'd truly been in a tight spot, he probably wouldn't have answered the phone in the first place. Rei relented, "Actually... I've got a favor to ask you..." So saying, Rei related the details of the commercial shoot and Izumi's potential involvement. "So basically, I need Izumi to agree to this offer..." Rei trailed off, expecting Shougo to understand his unsaid request.

"*I get it. What's the deadline for this thing?*"

"Sometime tomorrow." Silence followed Rei's reply for a moment. "...Shougo?"

"Nah, 's nothing. Hmm... by tomorrow, huh?" After a pause long enough to make Rei wonder, he continued on as though talking to himself, "*Well, they're still waiting for me to finish my lyrics right now, so I'm pretty sure we're just working on the karaoke track at the moment. Yeah, I bet I can swing it... probably?*" he reassured. "*All right. I'm not completely sure I'll have the time, but I'll do what I can!*" Shougo finished, with all of the confidence he could muster.

"You..." After such a half-distracted response, Rei wanted to tell Shougo that he didn't need to go so out of his way, but just then a voice in the background called out the singer's name, and Rei bit back the rest of his response.

"Comi~ng!... Ah, sorry. But hey! Let's do lunch tomorrow. If I can't make it, I'll let you know!" And with that, he hung up. Rei stared at his disconnected cell and released a small breath.

"How strange... He actually sounded slightly worried..." Usually, when Rei came to Shougo with a request, he'd immediately agree to it, often without even waiting to hear the details. He must have been honestly unsure about whether or not he'd be able to come through, after all.

Of course, without Shougo's agreement to help, they'd never be able to pull this thing off. But Shougo, too, was one of SenaPro's precious, top-billing names. His work should naturally come first and foremost as a top priority, given his current position.

"But if he's that busy, he really shouldn't go to all the trouble...for me..." With one last sigh, Rei quickly snapped his cell phone shut.

The next day...

Rei arrived at one of the more luxurious hotels in the capital. It was a weekday, so there weren't many people around, yet he still went out of his way to duck down a hall with little foot traffic, just in case. He'd gotten a call from Shougo some time after lunch, just as Rei had begun his work at the office again...

"I made it! I made it! Let's meet at ○○ Hotel, room 1120. We can get room service, too!" Shougo had exclaimed before hanging up, leaving Rei to wonder just what exactly Shougo thought he was in time for? Still, he was here now, in the place Shougo had mentioned, as requested...

"Here?" Rei sighed as he stared at the number plate outside room 1120. Rei understood how truly difficult it was for a celebrity of Shougo's caliber to find a quiet moment to talk without getting a private hotel room, but to Rei, meeting Shougo in a hotel room came part and parcel with some fairly depressing memories.

Still, he knew that he was the one who had asked for the favor in the first place, and sucking it up, he pressed the buzzer on the door. Immediately after came the frantic sound of footsteps, and the door was violently yanked open.

"Rei!! It's been forever!" Shougo cried, tugging Rei sharply over the threshold. Almost before the door was actually shut, Shougo's arm slipped around Rei's lower back and—

"Mmph!" Shougo's lips closed tightly over Rei's.



...Yes, *this* was the problem.

This was the very reason Rei avoided thinking about Shougo at all costs. Shougo had a habit of saying ludicrous things, like "*I love you*"

and other such nonsense, and Rei just couldn't handle it. After so many years of endless declarations of love, he no longer knew how to fight back, and exhausted from such an onslaught of emotion from the other man, he continually found himself being swept away in the moment.

No—admittedly, if it had been limited to simple confessions of love, he might still find it manageable. The kicker was that whenever Shougo did some task for him, he demanded rewards for his help. And that always led to more and more wanting, until Rei finally lost his grip on the situation.

Of course, he understood that all he needed to do was simply turn down the other man's advances. But then a bothersome series of complaints would follow—“*I don't wanna work, I can't work~*”—and Rei knew he was stuck with the status quo.

There were a number of rather convoluted reasons as to why things had progressed to such a level, and truly, the ups and downs and twists and turns in their mutually shared past would be enough to make anyone's head spin...

“Oi...what are you—!?”

“Ow!”

Lost in his thoughts, Rei hadn't noticed the hands slipping down his back to firmly grope his ass, and he shoved the other man away vehemently.

“Come on, just gimme a little something? It's been so long... Just let me refill my Rei reserves...?” Shougo's hand crept purposefully back along Rei's body, despite being so thoroughly rebuffed. Rei just glared back, unmoving and silent.

“Surely this isn't what you called me out for, right? What happened to your explanation?” At Rei's question, Shougo pulled back immediately and reached for a small desk clock he'd thrown aside on the bed, holding it up in his hand for show.

“Haha! Just take a look at this!” crowed while shoving the clock under Rei's nose. Shougo acted as though the clock were something amazingly special, but it looked like nothing more than a plain old desk clock to Rei...

“I called in a favor to a friend on the inside of the LalaLulu operation the second I arrived. Got a special recording to put in here, making this is a one-of-a-kind alarm clock. There's no way that Izumi won't fall for this thing!” Shougo explained, proudly.

What Rei had thought was a desk clock actually turned out to be an alarm clock... Okay, a special alarm clock with a personalized message to use as the alarm. Rei hadn't thought of using something like this to convince Izumi to do anything.

...Though perhaps ‘convince’ was the wrong word. ‘Bribe’ might be closer.

Rei still didn't understand what worth this sort of trinket could possibly have for Izumi, but given his utter obsession with that LuluLala-whatever, there was a high probability that Izumi would trip over himself trying to earn the clock.

“Wait...So, you haven't actually gone to talk to Izumi yet?” That must be what Shougo had been referring to when he said that he was sure Izumi would fall for this trick. It also explained why the clock was still here at the hotel. “Then what exactly did you mean by you ‘made it?’ And the second you ‘arrived?’” He tilted his head at Shougo's confusing choice of words.

Before Shougo had a chance to respond, though, Rei's cell phone began buzzing in his pocket. He pulled it out and saw from the display that it was a call from the manager of Shougo's band, the CRUSHERZ. Since Shougo was there with him, Rei unthinkingly pressed the answer button on the phone. “Yes, this is Sagara.”

“*Oh! Sagara-san? Is Shougo-san there with you by any chance?!*” Sotomura's frantic voice came over the phone, making Rei blink, puzzled. “*I received a message from him saying that he was going back to Japan for a bit and then he just disappeared!*”

“Well, he's here with me now,” Rei glanced Shougo's way after hearing the way the manager was talking, and gestured with his head as though to pose a question the other man. Then something twigged. “Huh? ‘Back to Japan?’ Wait a minute. Where are the CRUSHERZ now?”

“*They're in the middle of recording in London.*”

... London?...

“**LONDON!?**” Rei unthinkingly shouted before apologizing and promising to call Sotomura back and cutting the connection, fixing Shougo with a sharp glare. “Mind giving me an explanation for this? How exactly are you here in *Japan* when you're supposed to be in London?”

“Well, you see...” Shougo managed to look chagrined at his actions, but pasted on a winning smile and truthfully explained what had led to this turn of events.

Right after he had finished the phone call with Rei, Shougo had headed straight to the airport. He'd then hopped the first plane to Japan, arriving earlier that day in Narita, and spent the rest of the day running around getting the specialty clock made.

“A—are you insane!?” Rei yelled without thinking after Shougo finished his explanation. He'd never in his wildest dreams thought that Shougo would come all the way to Japan from London at his request.

“Well *you* asked me, Rei! I want to make anything you wish a reality!”

"But..." Rei began to protest, but found himself biting back his remarks at the look on Shougo's face.

"Plus," Shougo continued, "Right now I'm stuck on some lyrics, and I'm pretty sure it's because I haven't seen you for a while. Seriously! Right now, I'm suffering from a Rei deficiency!" He punctuated his insistent attempts at getting Rei to see his point of view by capturing Rei's lips in another kiss.

It was always like this.

Shougo was always, always completely serious—throwing his all into everything he aspired to accomplish and become. Saying things like, if it were for Rei, he'd do anything—that he desperately needed him, with absolutely no pretense or falsehoods.

This was exactly what made this...this *thing* between them so troubling for Rei.

Rei had called Shougo at 7 am that morning, which would have been about 11 pm in London. That meant that, within only a couple of hours of the call, Shougo had dashed off to the airport and flown to Japan. And *then* he'd gone so far as to ask for a personal favor from a seiyuu...

It stopped Rei's anger in its tracks to be told that all of the toil and work that Shougo went through was entirely for his sake.

For him. For *Rei*.

It was an immense thing that Shougo had done for Rei, but it had been partially Rei's fault for not checking Shougo's schedule before calling in the first place.

"Looks like I've run up a pretty high debt with this..." Rei said, begrudgingly.

"What, seriously? Well then..."

With shining eyes at Rei's admission, Shougo made as though to embrace him. However, Rei stopped his advance by raising both of his arms to drive him off.

"But not now! Take that," he gestured to the alarm clock, "Go and persuade Izumi immediately! Then get yourself back to London! I'll return the favor once you're back in Japan."

"Guess you're right..." Shougo laughed bitterly before kissing Rei with a resounding *smack!*

"Hey!" Rei sputtered and shoved Shougo off, which did absolutely nothing to wipe the mirth from Shougo's face.

"I'll just think of that as a down payment. And when I get back from London..." Shougo's eyes seemed to focus on the future before coming back to the present, "It's a promise!" With that, Shougo darted from the room, off to go talk to his brother.

Staring at the door as it banged shut, Rei let out a sigh. That kiss had been in no way satisfying, and Rei was, to his own frustration, bothered by how Shougo had left without even ordering with the room service he'd mentioned over the phone.

Logically, he knew that Shougo needed to go persuade Izumi as quickly as possible. He also knew that Shougo had to get back to London with all haste... But he couldn't help but think that Shougo might still have spared the time for them to at least have dinner together. The guy had to be tired from the flight from London, after all...

"No, I shouldn't coddle him like that!" After all, Shougo was no longer a child. If he was hungry, he'd be sure to eat something. Besides, if Rei had stopped him to ask if he wanted to eat, there was a high probability that Shougo would have responded with some cheesy line like, '*I don't want to eat dinner—I just want to eat you!*'

Nope. For now, Rei would leave Izumi to Shougo and return to work himself.

With that decided, Rei opened his phone and dialed the number of the CRUSHERZ's manager.

After work, Rei headed from his office back toward his apartment. Though his body was tired, the satisfied feeling of a job well-done kept his steps light. The area around SenaPro was definitely on the high-end of most housing developments, meaning the neighborhood got very quiet after dark. Besides a few people out walking their dogs, Rei barely saw anyone on his way home.

Rei thought about what he'd accomplished that day and what tomorrow's plans would encompass as he passed under the lights of the street lamps. When he finally heard back from Shougo, it was nearly 4 pm the next day while Rei was swamped with work.

"*Izumi says he'll do the commercial!!*" Shougo excitedly explained as soon as Rei answered his phone. He felt some of the tension in his body relax in relief. That alarm clock of Shougo's must have done the trick, after all.

"Is that so? Thanks." Now Rei just had to deal with making sure that Izumi's shoot went smoothly—though that was something he could think about later. Imagining how happy Nagisa and Seiya would be at the news brought an unconscious smile to Rei's face. All that was left was to figure out what was going on with Shougo.

"That reminds me, you *are* on your way to Narita Airport, right?" From his conversation with the CRUSHERZ's manager that afternoon, it seemed as though there was no immediate problem with Shougo being away from location for now, but...

"Of course!" Shougo confirmed brightly. *"If I don't do my work duties properly, you'll just be mad with me, after all!"*

"At least you understand..." Rei wasn't sure about the childish reasoning behind it, be he supposed that the important thing was that Shougo was getting things done. "Did everything work out with the plane tickets?"

"Yep! Perfectly! I should arrive in London tomorrow! That's not the real problem, though—my lyrics are," Shougo finished.

"Lyrics? Oh, right. You mentioned that they weren't finished yet." Rei's eyebrow twitched as he remembered their conversation at the hotel, along with mention of how Shougo's unfinished lyrics were somehow the result of not seeing Rei for so long, or some such nonsense... It surprised him to hear that Shougo wasn't just teasing; he really *was* behind on finishing writing his lyrics. "Are you okay? When you've got writer's block, it throws your whole schedule off." Granted, Shougo technically had a bit of leeway with his recording schedule at the moment, as without lyrics, nothing was getting done anyway.

"Hmm... I think that if I'd just been able to hold and hug you for a little bit longer, these lyrics would be a cinch, buuut..."

"Is this really the time for jokes?" As Rei found fault with Shougo's logic, he heard light laughter from the other end of the phone.

"Don't worry. I'll do my best here and look forward to what awaits me when I get back to Japan." Shougo sounded legitimately okay, which put Rei a bit more at ease—until he was forced to remember what he'd agreed to when Shougo returned, mood souring.

He'd been convinced it had been unavoidable, but perhaps he'd been a bit hasty in turning to Shougo for help in handling Izumi. But...no—Rei quickly realized that this time, this whole mess had been resolved thanks to Shougo's help.

"Right, right. Take care of yourself. Call me when you get back from London," Rei finished, immediately hanging up without waiting for Shougo's reply. He then turned around and dialed the number of Asou from the Agency to inform him of the Senas' decision to accept his commercial offer.

"I'm glad that worked itself out..." Rei muttered to himself.

He could tell that Asou had been a bit worried as to whether the offer would be accepted or not when he phoned the agency. There was evident relief in his voice when he answered the call, though Rei supposed that wasn't all that surprising given that this was a once-in-a-career chance to do business *the Ichijou Ryouma*. As soon as their conversation ended, Rei reported the state of affairs to the heads of the Sena household. Nagisa was thrilled, as expected—so much so, in fact, that she even agreed to give more thought to accepting the offer she'd dismissed out of hand earlier and consider performing in that two-hour-long drama special.

Seiya was happy, too, Rei noted with satisfaction.

"I knew you'd be able to pull it off, Rei-kun," he had responded, and when Rei recalled the smile that had accompanied those words, he was immensely grateful that they'd managed to make Izumi agree.

Even Izumi himself looked in better spirits than he had that morning, as he bounded home clutching that strange alarm clock. Now, if only his mood would last until filming for the commercial had finished, Rei would have no complaints whatsoever. The over-worked manager's spirits were unconsciously lighter...

... Except for the weight he felt when he remembered the promise he'd made to Shougo in the hotel room.

'I wonder when Shougo is due back in Tokyo? I should check with Sotomura tomorrow...' Rei mused, making a mental note to contact the man the next day, since it seemed hardly worth it to bother that night. He was nearly home now already.

"Oh! Welcome home!" came a sudden call from out of the darkness near the entrance to Rei's apartment building. Rei started and stood stock-still in surprise.

"Wh—what are you doing here?!" There waving his hand jovially at the perplexed man, was none other than the supposedly in-flight-to-London, Sena Shougo.

The young man shrugged in response to Rei's surprise, "Well... The weather got so bad that they bumped my flight to a later time, so it seems—"

"They *what*?!"

"Hey, can't help it if they aren't flying, can I?" Shougo grinned apologetically.

Rei thought of the other CRUSHERZ band members, their manager, and staff that must all be having a fit at that moment and felt a sudden headache rear its ugly head. But, he admitted, if planes weren't flying due to weather conditions, there really was nothing to be done under the circumstances.

"Please tell me that you at least called ahead to let them know..." Rei pleaded, praying for Shougo to have used his common sense.

"Of course! It's London's weather that's the problem anyway. They understood," he waylaid Rei's concern.

"Can't be helped, then... Come in," Rei allowed reluctantly, opening the auto-locked entrance and stepping into the elevator with Shougo. "I'm surprised you could stand out there without getting noticed by someone." Rei mentioned.

"Really? Well, I wasn't exactly waiting for a long time, but no one passed by anyway," Shougo remarked lightly, brushing off the concern. Rei felt his shoulders slump in relief that he lived in a place rarely frequented by passersby. He'd occasionally considered giving Shougo a duplicate key to his apartment for occasions such as these—but he knew such a gesture, logical though it might be, would only serve to make Shougo even more incorrigible, and he therefore quashed that idea in an instant. They stepped off the elevator together, and Rei opened his front door, beckoning Shougo through the entryway and into his room beyond.

The state of Rei's studio bachelor pad was as one might expect of a single guy living alone: in a word, disorderly. Though he kept his desk at the office well organized, this apartment was a better reflection of his true personality, and while it was far from a *disastrous* degree of clutter, that was mainly due to the fact that Rei didn't own enough stuff to make a big mess. As he pretty much only used his apartment for sleeping purposes, the only furniture besides the bed that he could boast was a coffee table and sideboard.

"Did you eat anything?" Rei called over his shoulder.

"Yep. I stopped at a restaurant. How about you?"

"I ate already," Rei replied loosening his tie and shrugging off his jacket to return to its hanger in the closet, lest it wrinkle.

Then, without any warning, it started.

"Then... Shall we?" as Rei had half-expected since seeing the man on his doorstep, Shougo wound his arms tightly around Rei from behind.

"You're quite energetic considering you had such a long flight today and then had to run all over the place after you disembarked." In fact, Shougo had probably had to go all the way out to Narita airport only to come back to Tokyo after he'd rung during the evening.

"Well, yeah, I *am* a little tired...but I haven't had my dessert yet..." Shougo murmured, in what Rei assumed was supposed to be a seductive tone. He wasn't sure he liked being compared to food but made no move to shake Shougo's arms off. After all, he'd known this was where things would lead the moment he'd let Shougo into his apartment.

"I've got work tomorrow," Rei reminded pragmatically, "Let's get this over with."

"Aww, you're kidding, right?... There's no way I'd waste an opportunity like this..." Shougo breathed down Rei's neck while his hand drifted to the belt holding his pants up, loosening the buckle and untucking Rei's shirt from his trousers as he searched for more skin.

Rather than wasting his energy protesting, Rei began unbuttoning his own shirt from the top, with Shougo assisting with the buttons from the bottom. When they reached each other halfway down Rei's torso, Shougo released his grip on the shirt and grasped Rei's hand instead.

"Rei..." Shougo murmured, the edge of his lips just barely grazing the slant of Rei's neck like a whisper of a kiss.

"... Mm..." Rei intoned in response.

Shougo slipped his hand into the part of Rei's shirt, seeking out his bare skin. Rei's shoulders flinched at the temperature of Shougo's hands, still cold from the nip outside even though they'd been inside for some time now. When he paused to think about it, Shougo had been waiting for him outside, and even though Spring was on its way, the nights in Tokyo were still fairly chilly. That *liar*... Shougo must have been trying to spare his feelings when he said he hadn't waited long. A celebrity's health was of utmost importance—*'Just what was he planning to do if he caught a cold from this?'* Rei was about to complain when Shougo stifled any protest with his lips.

"Nm...!"

Shougo kissed Rei's lower lip, sucking it into his mouth to part them and slip his tongue into the recesses of the other man's mouth. His tongue found Rei's and rubbed against it so strongly it felt like his tongue was being yanked out by the roots. Their tongues tangled together, shooting desire straight through Rei.

"Unh...!"

Just as the kiss began to rob Rei of his senses, Shougo scraped his fingers against his chest. Rei let out a muffled noise through his nose at the sensation. Shougo's fingers twisted and kneaded their way along the other's chest, and Rei felt his shoulders shiver. Though they'd been cold earlier, those fingers of his were gradually gaining back their warmth.

"Ah...nm."

When his fingers found a nipple and pinched strongly, Rei felt his knees weaken. He sprang back, releasing Shougo's lips but for a thin thread of saliva still connecting their mouths. In embarrassment, Rei quickly wiped his hand across lips and broke the connection. For a second, he thought he saw a look of hurt flash across Shougo's face and was taken aback. It wasn't as though he had any reason to dislike Shougo's kisses now, after all this time. He hadn't meant for it to look dismissive when he wiped his mouth, but if he back-tracked now it would seem like a mere excuse now.

This *thing* between them might be consensual, but they were by no means what Rei would consider lovers. After all, this whole affair had sprung from Rei's sense of guilt and sense of duty as Shougo's manager...right?

"The bed's right there. No need to be hasty," Rei explained in a hasty attempt to cover his mistake and looked down, away from Shougo. As he did so, though, he heard a light laugh.

"Not like I can help it, right? It's been so long. Even though I'd like nothing more than to sleep next to you every night..." Shougo easily smoothed over the awkward situation. And while he'd obviously meant it to sound like a joke, to put Rei's feelings at ease, Rei knew better than to dismiss the comment so lightly. He berated himself for not thinking of Shougo's feelings more.

It was becoming increasingly apparent that carrying on with this arrangement for so long had caused Rei to accidentally develop some level of *feelings* for Shougo. Thinking along those lines made him release an involuntary sigh. He had a feeling that if he delved too deeply into his feelings, he'd find a conclusion he wasn't yet prepared to accept.

"Rei? What's the matter?" Shougo sounded concerned at Rei's silence.

"Nothing. In any case, let's continue this on the bed." Rei extracted himself from Shougo's arms and settled onto the mattress, removing his glasses and setting them on the sideboard before Shougo even thought to move.

"Gotcha!" Shougo's previous worry dissipated at Rei's words. He smiled and settled next to him, wordlessly setting to divesting Rei of his shirt.

"I haven't showered yet, you know?"

"So what? I like the way you smell," Shougo murmured as he slid Rei's arms free from his sleeves. He leaned into the nape of Rei's neck and rested his lips there. "It's a good smell."

"Don't be ridiculous," Rei furrowed his eyebrows at the spellbound tone to Shougo's voice while he continued kissing his neck.

As his work involved a lot of human interaction, Rei did try to remain conscious of the impression he left on others, paying particular attention to his smell. He supposed that, as the temperature that day hadn't been particularly hot, he wasn't drenched in sweat or anything, but still. After a full day's work, other factors notwithstanding, he was bound to smell a bit.

"It's not ridiculous, it's true. I think you smell like the best smell in the world."

"Quit talking and just get on with it!" Rei was finished with Shougo's flattery, since he didn't know how to respond to it.

"Gotcha." Shougo giggled faintly at Rei's protestations and moved his lips from Rei's neck to his collar. From there he continued his kisses across the top of the man's shoulders.

This was always Shougo's way: to lightly kiss all over Rei's body as he slowly removed his clothes. It was probably some sort of retaliation against Rei's strict instructions to leave no lasting marks. Instead, Shougo would kiss his body so lightly it almost tickled, though it gradually became more and more erotic as he continued.

"Uh...!"

Shougo spent extra time at Rei's particularly sensitive spots, but neglected nothing, lavishing Rei's body with kisses. Rei soon found himself naked beneath Shougo's hands, and no matter how much he writhed, Shougo continued to lick languidly, starting from his toes all the way up his thigh.

"It's so cute that you have so many sensitive spots, Rei," Shougo remarked with amusement.

"Sh—shut up..." Rei attempted to snipe back.

"Like between your toes..."

"Ung!"

"Or the backs of your knees..." he continued, kissing each part and then licking after. Rei had discovered a surprising number of pleasurable spots on his body of his years sleeping with Shougo. But for all that Shougo was seeking out and paying attention to the most elusively sensitive areas, he was pointedly *avoiding* Rei's most sensitive area entirely. Rei writhed with every touch as it brought him more and more pleasure, pushing him closer and closer to the brink. But such fleeting stimulus just wasn't enough to push him over wholly, leaving Rei teetering at the edge.

"Just...stop! Cut it out already!" Rei shoved at Shougo's head, which had wandered somewhere around his navel.

"No. It's not enough," Shougo lifted his head as he spoke and continued to stretch up Rei's body until he was able to draw his mouth into a deep kiss.

"...Ah!" Much as Rei didn't want to admit it, Shougo's kiss did make his breath speed up. He could hardly tell whether the kiss was more pleasurable or painful by now, his head was spinning so much.

Without breaking the kiss, Shougo trailed his hands down Rei's chest to again tease at all the points that made him writhe, wherever his fingers caught against Rei's skin. Every place he brushed caused a bolt of pleasure to course through Rei's body.

"Nm...mm..."

Finally, Shougo started touching him where he really wanted to be touched. Instead of grasping and pulling on his dick, though, he pressed firmly against it, and as his fingers moved, Rei felt thick, viscous pleasure travel down his legs to the tips of his toes.

"Feel good?"

"Don't ask me...that. Idiot—" Rei tried to glare up at Shougo to find him incredibly close, smiling happily, without a drop of remorse or apology on his features.

"I'll make you feel even better..."

"N-no...ah!" Shougo moved his mouth toward the nipple he'd been sharply teasing earlier.

A keening cry escaped from Rei's throat as the other man obscenely sucked and ran his tongue along the manager's chest. Rei could tell that he was way too sensitive for this sort of thing, especially considering that it wasn't as if he hadn't had sex many times in the past. He knew that this extra layer of sensation had something to do with the fact that his partner was Shougo, but that thought process lead to complicated ground that he didn't want to explore at the moment—not when Shougo's tongue was driving away most of his coherent thoughts.

Barely aware of where Shougo's hands were during all of this, Rei started when he felt them travel further down and finally close around his shaft directly. Shougo's next words sent a jolt straight through his lower-half. "Mind if I have a taste?"

"D—on't ask me that!"

Shougo's expression was the same as ever, but his voice sent a hold of liquid seduction through Rei's whole body. "Aww, come on. I'd love to hear you say it. Tell me to suck you off..."

Rei gulped and shook his head in disbelief. "I'd never...never say that."

"Too bad," Shougo sighed in mock regret. "But you know, I'm going to suck you either way..." he finished and stuck his mouth directly between Rei's legs, extending his tongue to lick the tip.

Rei jerked at the sudden motion, "Ah! ...Uhh..." Shougo wrang the cry from his partner's throat as he slowly licked him from base to tip. Then he began in earnest, running his mouth over the head and sucking in small kisses. In surprise, Rei's hips bucked up towards the mouth. Thanks to Shougo's repeated licks to the shaft before him, Rei's slit was leaking and twitching, and the wet slurping sound that reached Rei's ears was grotesquely sexual.

Rei groaned again as Shougo finally closed his lips over the top. He felt as though his lower back was melting from the passionate heat of Shougo tonguing him from inside his mouth. "N-no...stop! Shougo... Let me go..." He'd only been directly touched for a few moments and he already felt like he was going to explode. He could barely hold back, so worried was he of cumming in Shougo's mouth. Rei tried to push Shougo's head away, but the man was having none of it. He pulled back once more to the very tip and then licked the head with a quick swipe. He kissed the end and blew against it before covering the whole thing with his mouth again.

It was too much for Rei, unable to hold off any longer. With a gasped moan, he spilled straight into Shougo's waiting mouth, changing a glance down just in time to see him swallow the mouthful.

Rei quirked an eyebrow in judgment. "Don't just swallow that kind of thing," he mumbled. He knew firsthand that it wasn't exactly a pleasant taste; he'd never been able to get used to it himself and avoided swallowing whenever possible.

Shougo had no such compunctions. "I want everything you have to give, Rei," he said as he looked deeply up into Rei's eyes. The cheesy line was even harder to swallow than the actual semen. It was bad enough to get swept away in the act, but Rei felt even worse for letting Shougo voice such feelings. He knew he was a terrible person for doing this sort of thing with Shougo merely out of some twisted sense of obligation as opposed to any real emotions—unlike Shougo himself, who poured his whole self into the act.

While Rei was silently battling his inner turmoil, Shougo had moved on to a more private area. He maneuvered Rei's knee to bend up so that he could position his tongue further down and in.

"Ah! ... J—just use lubricant..." Rei snapped, frazzled by the sudden influx of sensation.

"I'll use that, too," Shougo replied easily, moving his head back from between his legs long enough to reply. "It's easier on you that way, right?" Even as Shougo said the words, he pushed his tongue in as deeply as possible. Rei felt his insides wet with Shougo's saliva and tensed all the muscles in his back. Rimming was the one thing he had the most trouble getting used to. His vision blurred at the thought of exactly where Shougo was licking. That combined with the all-too-intense feeling of Shougo's tongue invading a very private entrance always prompted Rei to tell him to stop. And yet, Shougo was undeterred, his hot tongue licking the outside pucker before drawing back and letting the cold air hit the sensitive area, then plunging back in, over and over. As he continued to thrust his tongue inside, he spread Rei's cheeks apart to angle deeper and further within.

"Uhn—!" Rei's knees shook as Shougo's tongue twisted inside him. Much as he mentally disliked the action, Rei's body betrayed him at times such as these. He felt the heat curl and build in his body with every swipe and wiggle of Shougo's tongue, and when he pulled back, Rei felt the tension leave his body with a vocalized gasp.

Shougo moved away briefly to grab a condom packet and tube of lube from the sideboard. "Open the lid for me?" He passed the tube over to Rei while he ripped open the condom package. Fingers trembling, Rei did as he was told and removed the lid, squirting a liberal dollop in the center of Shougo's palm. Repositioning himself, Shougo pushed one finger as deep as it would go into the crook between Rei's legs.

"Nn...uh!" The finger curved and twisted within the man, spreading the lubricant and fanning the heat building within him as he got used to the feeling. As the finger brushed up against that particularly good spot within him, Rei's voice slipped from between his lips in a wanton

moan. He immediately flushed.

“I-I...ah!” Shougo gave no quarter and increased the amount of fingers spreading Rei’s entrance. Though it hurt a bit as he pushed more fingers in, the pleasure increased as well. It was only a matter of time before he would be completely swept away in sensation. If only Shougo would just keep fingering that area...

“Looks like this part of you is saying that you want me. You’re clenching up around my fingers,” Shougo remarked knowingly, feeling the way Rei’s body reacted to the stimulus.

Rei flushed again in embarrassment, “N—no, I just...”

“Are, too. See?” Shougo twisted his fingers again.

“Ah!” Shougo proved his point by pushing immediately up against Rei’s prostate, making his hips jerk in response.

Shougo withdrew his fingers and wiped them on his thigh. “Yep, looks like you’re just about ready.” He leaned back over Rei and murmured lowly, “I can’t hold back much longer myself.”

“How many times have I told you to stop saying that sort of thing?” It was a complaint Rei had made many a time yet seemed never to back up with any action. Shougo always wanted some sort of reaction from Rei, so he continued to ask, clearly grateful for any response he could wring from his partner. Rei never bothered to confirm if Shougo *actually* wanted anything in particular when he made those sorts of comments. He knew that if he asked Shougo about it, he’d probably say something stupid again. That was something he was happy to avoid.

“Gotcha. Getting on with it, as you wish,” Shougo placated in response to Rei’s perturbed attitude. He lifted Rei’s legs and brushed his dick over where his fingers had just been, and Rei inhaled sharply as Shougo slowly pushed in, leaving him feeling as if he was being pulled apart. As soon as the head of Shougo’s penis pushed past Rei’s inner muscles, the rest of him followed in one shove, and Rei gave a breathy yelp as he felt Shougo slide home.

“Sounds like that felt good, huh?” Shougo sounded pleased that Rei was enjoying the experience.



Rei gulped for air to retort, “Sh-shut up...ah!” He’d meant to chide the other man for pushing in all at once, but his voice didn’t have the angry tone he’d been going for.

“You like it when I’m buried in you like this, right? Feels good?” Shougo ground down just a bit for emphasis.

"Ah-hahn... nnh!"

Shougo wasn't making any pronounced movements, but Rei could feel himself become rallying with only the slow gyrating deep inside him despite having just cum only moments ago.

In the past, he'd never been able to get off when on the receiving end of their trysts, only finding his pleasure when Shougo touched him at the same time. But now, it was as Shougo said: he really *did* enjoy how it felt when his partner was buried to the hilt. Unwilling to admit it as ever, though, Rei swiveled his head in a sharp no.

"Now you're just being stubborn." Shougo sighed fondly at Rei's stubbornness—and then shoved Rei all the way down onto the mattress to angle himself up for a kiss to Rei's downcast face.

The sudden change in the angle of Shougo's member as it drove into Rei's body caused his passage to contract in pleasure, and he could feel Shougo pulse larger where they were joined.

"Can I move yet?" Shougo asked, almost timidly.

Truth be told, Rei was *more* than ready. He'd been eager from the start, actually, and slowing down now was not acceptable. "J—just do me already..." Shougo laughed shortly at Rei's quick response and grabbed tight onto his legs to begin thrusting in earnest.

"Ah—*ah!*" Shougo's cock pierced deep into Rei, stirring up his insides and driving Rei crazy with how amazing it felt. His mind was drifting in a haze of bliss when Shougo's voice pierced through the mist. "Rei..."

The sound of his name being called like that made something clench in Rei's chest. They'd come this far and he was so *hot* that there was no way he could stop now. Or maybe this desperation was a direct result of hearing his name on Shougo's lips. Either way, it seemed he couldn't win against his hormones or true feelings.

Shougo had been the one who had moaned his name, but a different face flew to the forefront of his mind at the sound. And when they'd been kissing earlier, he'd found himself focusing on Shougo's fascinating eyes and imagining they were someone else's. Such a strange color, he couldn't help but see another man in them... Even though he knew that wasn't the person currently buried within him.

"Sh-Shou—go..." Straining to fight back those thoughts, Rei closed his eyes tightly as he uttered Shougo's name and wound his arms around the man's neck, as if confirming just who was in bed with him by repeating his name. Shougo drew Rei in closer as he gripped his neck and waited for Rei's emotions to settle before beginning his slow thrusts again.

Their bodies clung too close together to allow for any big movements, but they both were teetering on the edge of their respective climaxes. With sweat-slick hands, Rei grabbed onto Shougo and snapped his hips up to meet his partner's thrusts. Putting some power into his legs, Rei closed himself around Shougo's cock, and the tightened area made all of Shougo's movements sharper and heightened the feelings inside him, his thrusts more wild and passionate.

"Shougo—!"

"*Rei...*" At the sound of his name on Shougo's lips, Rei found his completion. His body spasmed and closed around the man buried inside of him. He could feel the wetness pour from Shougo as he found his own climax as well. The arms around Shougo's neck lost their strength, drained from such a powerful climax, and fell limp to the bedsheets.

"Rei? ... You okay?" Shougo whispered, but there was no response. Rei heard Shougo call his name and distantly, heard the words "I love you" mumbled into his temple.

But to Rei's ears, it overlapped with another voice in his head saying the same thing...

Rei's hunger woke him the next morning, and he struggled to open his heavy eyelids—which weren't the only part of him that felt heavy; his whole *body* ached with a dull sort of sluggishness that made rising from the bed practically unthinkable. His memories from the night before flooded back in an instant, and Rei woke from his stupor with a start, glancing around at the bedsheets surrounding him.

"Shougo...?"

There was no one else to be found in his apartment, and the shower was empty as well. All that filled the apartment was the still silence of early morning.

"Did he...go home?" Rei questioned, slightly relieved, and his sigh spilled into the room as it slowly filled with light from the gap in the curtains. Rei hated himself for feeling relieved not to have to see Shougo immediately after a night spent together, and he grimaced at the selfish emotion that welled up within him as he thought about the night before. Glancing over at his coffee table, Rei noticed something sitting atop it, and he slid his feet over the edge of the bed and padded over to get a better look.

"What's this?" It was perfectly normal stationary, but when he looked at the contents, his eyes widened. It was in Shougo's familiar handwriting, but the lyrics written down on it were some that he'd never seen before. Now that he thought about it, he remembered Shougo idly mentioning during their conversation that he hadn't yet managed to finish the lyrics he'd been working on recently, and that if he'd had longer to hold on to Rei, he'd have had no trouble with them. Rei had taken it as a joke, but seeing the lyrics finally completed, he breathed a sigh of relief. As he started to read the lyrics, though, his contentment twisted into a tight pain in his chest.

Written on the paper was a love song—and Rei knew well...that all of Shougo's love songs were written about him, *for* him.

It was always the same, with Shougo insisting that he always, always sang love songs specifically for Rei. He would never forget the day when Shougo had confessed that all of the songs, every song that his thousands of fans listened to and cried along with, were actually written for him.

He sighed deeply, distracted with the unease in his heart. "Why *me*...?" he asked the room at large. Rei would never be able to return those feelings, no matter how many times Shougo repeated them. Because he was in love with...

But before his brain could veer into territory he really didn't want to dwell in, his usually scheduled morning alarm started ringing. Rei lifted his head from its slump. "Uh oh. Can't let time get away from me now."

He turned off the alarm quickly, eager to return to the usual humdrum of his work days. "Gotta get to work." Sucking in a deep breath, he put the events from the night before behind him and headed into the bathroom to get ready for his day.

2

Chapter 2

Rei was drowning in despair.

It was winter, and the chill in the air was enough to freeze, leaving him well aware of how his body heat was being slowly but surely sapped away as he lay with his back on the cold asphalt beneath him.

He'd long stopped caring, though. About anything—and when he'd thoughtlessly picked a fight, he'd come to lying flat on his back, limbs spread wide, in an alley in a bustling market district.

He'd probably wind up freezing to death if he just closed his eyes and slipped off to sleep—but at this point...that might not be so bad.

The city beyond the alleyway was steeped in light, glittering illumination twinkling brilliantly, and he could catch countless boisterous voices chattering noisily. As he lay there, staring blankly ahead, he released a soft puff of white breath, reflecting distantly that *oh...*it was December 24th.

'Right...it's Christmas Eve tonight...'

That was probably why the crowds bustling by looked so *happy*—and this realization made them seem all the more distant. The fact that it was Christmas...and the warm, friendly sights as well...

"I feel like the little match girl..." Rei muttered to himself, voice trembling as it spilled over his lips. He recalled the tale of the little girl selling matches on a street corner in the middle of winter, with no one to care for her.

'Right...I'm gonna wind up just like her... Disappearing from this world with no one to give two shits about me...' And with this...he closed his eyes, and the world began to fade away. All light...all sound...even the sensation of cold and chill all grew distant. This must be what it felt like...to die.

An image of his mother, who'd died in an accident only a few days prior, flickered to life in the back of his mind. They hadn't exactly been close, but she'd been the only family he had, since his father wasn't in the picture. Apparently she'd been someone's mistress, but they'd been cut off from contact with the man around when Rei had been born, so he'd grown up not knowing his father's face or even his name.

But even his mother...had been someone far removed from Rei's consciousness. She'd raised Rei using money she made as a prostitute, and given the nature of her business, she'd never been around much when Rei was at home. He'd spent many long hours alone from a young age.

He'd stopped really caring for her sometime in elementary school, and when he'd entered middle school, he'd started picking fights with anyone who crossed his path. While he'd managed to make it to high school, his behavior had only worsened, and he got involved in a fair number of dirty dealings.

But despite his lack of studying, he'd still managed to make decent grades, and his teachers had even recommended that he take exams to get into a university, but he'd had to give up *that* dream due to a lack of funds. Feeling like his future had been snatched away by his family situation, he'd grown even more violent.

Lately, he'd stopped dropping by his mother's home altogether and rarely saw her...until just recently, when he'd received an emergency phone call. It had been the police, informing Rei that his mother had been in an accident. He'd rushed to the hospital, but she had already slipped away.

The moment he'd seen her lying there in that small, white bed, her face pale...it had felt like a hole had just opened up beneath him. He'd been avoiding having to see her for so long...but he still *needed* a mother. But it was only at that point, when Rei had been left all alone, that he'd finally realized as such.

They hadn't spent much time together at all, but she'd been the one to raise him. She had been his only family, the only person he had any real ties to in the whole world.

He'd found himself regretting not spending more time with her, but there was nothing much he could do when that person was already dead. He couldn't even give her a proper funeral, in financial straits as he was, and he *hated* himself from the bottom of his heart for this.

He couldn't *do* anything. He didn't *have* anything.

No family, no money, no *hope*. He had *nothing*.

And it was that sense of utter self-loathing that had him where he was now—flat on his back in an alley. He couldn't muster up the strength to care anymore and felt everything just fade far away into the background.

The world would just keep slipping away...and maybe he could die like this. Was this all his mother had left him? A life of assured solitude and distance from others?

And that was when it happened.

The air around him suddenly *changed*—and he felt his consciousness snap back to the here and now. He could sense someone else near him—he'd been alone before, but there was someone else here now. It was *oppressive*, demanding he respond...

Someone else...was here.

A cool, refreshing scent brushed his nose—and his suspicions were immediately confirmed. He couldn't ignore the presence now, and he slowly opened his eyes, his lids stiff from the icy chill about him—

—and found himself face to face, with only perhaps 30 or 40 cm separating them, with the face of a foreigner.

“—Uwah!” Rei immediately leapt up, scrambling back to place space between himself and the man as his heart pounded from shock, but his joints mounted a protest, sore and stiff from the cold, and he grimaced in pain.

“Oh—you’re alive! Thank goodness, I was worried you were dead!”

Rei gave a start at the perfectly fluent Japanese delivered from a rather unexpected source, raking the man over with a glance. Huh...? His face was...

On first glance, the deep lines in the man’s face had suggested he was a foreigner, but on taking a closer look, it was clear he had some mixed ancestry. On top of it all, Rei was getting the eerie feeling that he’d *seen* this man somewhere before.

Where, though? He wrinkled his brow suspiciously, but the man didn’t seem intimidated in the least, extending a hand. “You’re hurt! Let’s get you to a hospital.”

Rei froze for a moment at the unexpected suggestion, then shook his head. “...I’ll be fine. This is nothing.” And he truly believed that; sure, he’d thought he might shuffle off the mortal coil, as it were, just now, but that hadn’t been because of his injury—merely the chill. For the rather quarrelsome Rei, who jumped into fights without thinking, this kind of injury was just part of a day’s work.

But the foreign-looking man didn’t seem so convinced. “But—if it gets infected...”

Rei felt his irritation flare at the worried tone in the man’s voice. For someone like Rei, drowning in despair, these were nothing more than pretty words, seeming merely like hypocritical niceties.

“I said I’m *fine*! I’m broke, I’ve got no parents, and I don’t feel like moving from this spot!” He turned on his heel and placed his back to the man—before pointedly flopping back to the ground with his limbs spread. The man would soon leave him in peace, and if Rei happened to die, the he would likely suffer nothing more than an uneasy conscience.

Maybe he’d gotten caught up in the spirit of the Eve, hoping to do some good deed for another. Regardless, Rei wanted no part in his hypocritical experiment. It only made him *irritated* that now he wouldn’t be able to die in peace, unknown and uncared for by anyone.

He just wanted to *get this over with* already. Consequences be damned. Any feelings this man had for a stranger he passed on the street would likely disappear as soon as he left this place and melded back into his everyday life.

But while Rei struggled internally with these thoughts, the man still refused to be moved, and after a long silence that suggested he’d been mulling something over, Rei caught the sound of not feet scraping the concrete...but something rustling. Rei wouldn’t lie and say he wasn’t curious as to what was going on, but he stubbornly refused to give in, keeping his back to the man and closing his eyes as he waited for the man to leave.

“...All right then. I’ll leave you some money here, so get yourself to a hospital, okay? And also...”

With these words, something warm and heavy draped itself over Rei’s shoulders. “?!”

“There’s a ticket in the pocket there; come and check out the show if you have time.” The man didn’t seem put off at all by Rei’s attitude, instead speaking to him with a voice as light and soft and—he didn’t want to confirm, but *warm* as whatever he’d just laid across Rei.

In the end, he couldn’t bear it any more, and his eyes popped open as he scrambled upright again—where he realized that the man had covered him with the rather expensive-looking coat he’d been wearing...and on top of it, a wallet—cash and all—that looked very much like something the man would own.

“Wai—are you *insane*?!” His eyes flashed wide, and he glanced around frantically—but the man had disappeared.

'He..seriously just left this and took off?'

He spent a few long moments in shock, just staring at the wallet. Unlike the illusions experienced by the little match girl, neither the coat nor wallet faded away, no matter how long he spent looking at the items.

“.....” After much internal debate, though, Rei warily reached to take the wallet in hand, and on opening it, his eyes goggled at the sight of a thick stack of cash, a sum far greater than he’d ever before held. And it wasn’t just *cash*—there were credit cards and debit cards as well, all just sitting there.

“Seriously...? Looks like the little match girl’s just become little Princess Sarah...” he mumbled to himself with a bitter smile in his tone, though he couldn’t bring himself to laugh.

Was this *actually* happening right now? His imagination ran wild with fantasy, so unable was he to accept that this was real—maybe he’d already died and this was just some post-mortem dream. Amazing strokes of luck like this only happened inside fairy tales; never to real people like *him*.

But here, Rei recalled what the man had said to him and shoved a hand into the pocket of the coat hanging from his shoulders. “He said there was something in the pocket...this?” He tugged out the small slip of paper his fingers brushed over—and realized it was a *ticket*.

Musical Benetnasch, Theater Capella, Starring: Sena Seiya...

“AH!” He remembered now—where he’d seen that man before! It was a face he’d watched from the other side of the television screen several times. Wasn’t he a singer...or wait, maybe an actor? Rei wasn’t exactly well-versed in these kinds of things, so he couldn’t be sure, but if the guy was starring in a *musical*, he had to be at least one of those.

“...Guess high and mighty celebrities have money to burn on charity cases, huh...” he muttered with a bitter smile before standing and shoving the ticket back into the coat pocket.

He still couldn’t quite believe what had just happened, but now that he knew the man was at least a real, living human being, he was starting to regain a sense of reality. At the very least, it was no mistake that he was now in possession of the windfall he’d always so desperately longed for time and time again.

“Well, if I’m gonna kick the bucket, I may as well at least use this generously donated cash first!” he boasted as a bit of self-encouragement, and set off down the dimly lit alleyway.

The man had urged him to head to a hospital, but Rei had absolutely no intention of doing so. Injuries like this were an everyday occurrence for him, so he didn’t think he needed any treatment for one, and what was the point in getting medical care anyway, when he was just going to die soon enough?

No—he was going to do what he wanted right now, buy what he wanted, and live the high life he’d never been able to experience before. He was planning on dying anyway, so he wouldn’t have to worry about what might happen tomorrow if he spent all of the cash in one blow tonight.

But...try as he might to convince himself he was doing the smart thing...he just couldn’t get in the *mood*. He felt no desire to enter any of the shops he saw as he walked along, nor could he find anything that he felt compelled to purchase.

Instead, he felt his mood spiraling downward once again, hastened there by his lonely presence in the middle of so much festivity and merriment, with all manner of Christmas songs piping over speakers wherever he went and happy couples and families filling the streets.

He stopped in before the show window of a building near the train station, noting the boxes of presents wrapped in shiny silver paper and fir tree covered in what looked like snow with a white reindeer-like animal standing to its side—a beautiful Christmas display. He stared blankly at it for a long while before sighing. “What’s a guy who wants to die need money for anyway...?”

It would’ve been nice if he could convince himself that having money meant he ought to try *living*, but the despair that resided deep within Rei was too ingrained to be so easily dispelled, and any desires he might have had were sucked soundlessly down into a dark, black pit.

He could think of nothing he wanted, nothing he wanted to *do*. He didn’t need anything now, it was all pointless.

Maybe he should have just stayed where he was, just slipped off into a dreamless death flat on his back in an alleyway.

“There’s a ticket in the pocket there; come and check out the show if you have time.”

The man had had a strange voice... A deep, masculine tenor...but somehow still soft and gentle, with a lightness far from superficial. So...very, very *warm*.

He wanted to hear it again.

“It said he was the star, right...?” He was pretty sure the theater indicated on the ticket was around her, so if he went, he’d be able to hear that voice.

He pulled the ticket out of his pocket again—indeed, the theater was quite nearby, perhaps only a ten-minute walk. He ran his eyes over the words *Starring: Sena Seiya*, noting the date right below it: December 24th, 8 PM.

'Wait..December 24th...?'

"Fuck, that's today!" he yelped, and he frantically glanced around for a clock display. Thankfully, since he was right in front of a station, there was a clock set up by the bus rotary—7:55 PM.

The moment he glimpsed the time, he set off for the theater at a dead run.

In the midst of the buzz of the crowd and an excited stir in the theater, Rei felt his awareness slowly settle back into the real world. The curtain had now dropped, and the lights had come back up in the audience's seats.

Words of praise dropped from the lips of nearby spectators as they stood and began to make their way to the exits—except for Rei, who couldn't bring himself to stand just yet.

Something had filled him inside—he'd thought he'd been empty, a blank void of nothingness, and now he felt *full* again, and he couldn't move a muscle, not just yet.

When he'd burst through the doors of the theater written on the ticket, the curtain had risen as if everyone had just been *waiting* for his arrival, and Rei had settled in to enjoy the musical without much background on the activity or expectations.

It had been his first time taking in a musical—hell, he'd never seen *any* kind of movie or play or any performance of that sort. He'd honestly always thought they were stupid, nothing more than stories full of farces with made-up lives. What was the point of sitting and watching that kind of thing?

But when the musical had ended—the musical, which should have been little more than a fairy tale—Rei had sat there in his seat...and broken down in tears. ".....!"

Everything burned—his eyes, the inside of his nose, his hitched breaths, his flushed cheeks. He couldn't recall when the last time he'd cried like this had been, and try as he might to wipe away the tears, they just kept flowing. The sight of the main character refusing to let the loss of his family and lover ruin all human relationships for him, the way he charged forward and continued on without giving up had really hit home, and it *hurt*.

That character...was completely different from Rei, who had peered into the abyss of despair, finally tipped by the loss of his mother, unable to do more than crouch there and wait for death to take him.

And it was this difference between himself and the man in the musical that so strongly shook him to the core. However, he understood that he hadn't experienced this in the form of a musical, he wouldn't have been able to so easily accept the lessons.

'It overwhelmed me...'

He'd never known how strongly a human voice could resonate within his heart. The voices, the music, the lights, had all worked in concert to force his tear ducts to burst, and it felt as if that warm voice he'd heard a mere few hours before in a cold, dark alley...was echoing even more strongly and fiercely within him now. His heart felt *replenished* again, as if the thoughts from before of having nothing left were little more than a dream. Something had bubbled up, warm and bright, from the bottomless pit that he'd thought of as an abyss of despair.

He would never have imagined...that this single slip of paper he'd found in the pocket of a coat could inspire such change within him. After all, absolutely nothing had changed as far as his situation went—except that he no longer wanted to die. He had even started thinking about how to go about ensuring he kept on living.

And it was all thanks to that foreigner, Sena Seiya.

"Umm...we're closing up soon, so..."

At the staff member's hesitant reminder, Rei shouted, "I have something I need to return to Sena Seiya-san! Please let me see him!"

The poor man likely hadn't been expecting to hear that from Rei, and his eyes goggled in shock, before blinking a few times in confusion and offering sadly, "I'm sorry, but there's really nothing I can..."

"*Please!*" He dropped his head in a deep bow as the man tried to gently refuse him. He *had* to see Sena Seiya. He wanted to see him, return the coat and wallet, and apologize.

The staff member continued trying to turn him down but was eventually won over by Rei's persistence, allowing with a sigh, "...All right, I'll check with Sena first."

"Th...thank you so much!!" He bent into another bow as the man walked away, finally reaching up to wipe roughly at his eyes and staring holes into the door through which the man had left, pinning all his hopes on this moment.

When he stopped to think about it, the man had likely been a mere staff member of the theater, in no position to speak with or convince Seiya to do anything, but if Rei let this chance pass by, he was certain he'd never have the chance to see Seiya again. He and Rei walked in completely different worlds.

After a few long moments, though, the man returned: "It seems...Sena is willing to see you."

The words were delivered with a measure of hesitation, but Rei released a sigh of relief, and fighting back the tears that threatened to start flowing again, he dipped his head into a bow of gratitude. "Thank you very much...!"

"Not at all—this way, please." They passed through a side door out of the theater hall into the wings, down a long hall still buzzing with energy and unbarked fervor—before pausing at the door to a dressing room. The man knocked on the door—and a response came from within, which set Rei's heart to pounding. "I've brought him, as requested."

"Great, thanks." Seiya's caught Rei, standing stiff and straight with nervousness. "So...you came after al!" His eyes crinkled at their corners as he spoke. "Wait...huh? Did you not go to the hospital?"

Rei felt his eyes heat again with unshed tears when met with the same smile as before and the gentle question, and biting back the urge to weep, he thrust out the coat and wallet.



"Huh...? But—I gave those to you?"

He was probably being serious—but Rei shook his head at Seiya’s curious expression. “I can’t take them, not this much. I’m returning them to you.”

But—you don’t have any money, right? Without money, you can’t make it to a hospital.” Those words from anyone else but Seiya would have made Rei want to snap Are you treating my like an idiot?! but when Seiya said them, it sounded like nothing more than a truthful relation of the facts.

Seiya was likely a man of pure heart, merely innocently worried for Rei’s good health. “But...” He shook his head, pressing home the fact that he still couldn’t accept such a large sum. He was no longer the Rei that had wanted to use up the funds and then slink off somewhere to die. Seiya was his *savior*, and he didn’t want to cause the man any further trouble.

Seiya watched him for a while, scratching idly at the back of his neck—before his expression brightened as an idea came to him. “Then—how about this! Instead of accepting the cash, become my assistant!”

Assistant...? “Huh...?!” Rei gaped openly at Seiya, eyes wide at the unexpected suggestion. But Seiya didn’t seem to notice Rei’s shock, instead smiling merrily.

“That seals it, then! This is great! I’ve actually been looking for an assistant—perfect!”

“Eh...? Eh? EEEEHHHH??” Rei had simply wanted to return the money—how had he gotten from that to *this*?

“Oh right—how old are you?”

“Huh? I’m 18.”

“A high schooler?”

“No—I’ve graduated...” he answered blankly, still half in shock from the unexpected turn of events—then zipped his lips. What was he doing, telling a stranger his life’s story? It was almost as if he was *trying* to earn the opportunity to work as this man’s assistant...

“Excellent! Would’ve been tough, having you work as my assistant *and* attend classes.” This made it clear Seiya was entirely serious. It had definitely been a sudden decision, that much was clear, but Rei could tell it wasn’t a joke and that he wasn’t being teased or led on. Rei could feel that Seiya just wasn’t that sort of person.

But...that didn’t make him the kind of person who could just nod with a polite ‘yes’ and let Seiya take care of him.

Rei had never met someone so angelically pure-hearted as Seiya—let alone someone so blessed with talent and finances... For someone like him, with no education and poor behavior, to be around such a brilliant person just couldn’t be good. And yet...

“Oh right—when should we get you moved in?”

“M—moved in?!”

“Yeah; you said you didn’t have parents, right? Then you should just come live with me!” Seiya suggested lightly.

“Huh?!” Rei blinked, not quite grasping the concept of ‘with me’ at first.

“I just figured it’d be easier for you to be my assistant if you lived in my home. That way I could ask you to take care of personal business as well!”

And this explanation finally clarified what ‘with me’ mean—he would be living *in Seiya’s home*. “Ah-ah-aha-ahhh umm—!!” He knew he needed to turn down the offer to work as Seiya’s assistant, so how had they gotten to Rei *living* with him now?!

“Hm?”

“Just...why? Why are you...trying to hire some stranger off the streets?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I’ve been looking for an assistant.”

“Yes, you said that!” That *wasn’t* what he’d been asking. He didn’t even really know what kind of work an assistant *did*—but it sounded like it involved being around Seiya and taking care of various managerial tasks.

And then on top of that, to *live* with the guy...? They had just met that day—and with Rei flat on his back in an alleyway; Seiya was being *far* too trusting here. “But...what if I wind up being a really bad person?”

Seiya simply smiled. “I know you aren’t.”

“You know...?” Despite the horrible circumstances of their first meeting?

Rei’s brows drew together in confusion, but Seiya continued with a grin, “I could see the beautiful tears you shed from the stage—that made it clear to me...that your heart must be beautiful as well.”

‘Beautiful...?’

Shocked as he was that Seiya had noticed him crying, it was even more unbelievable to hear these words from the most beautiful person Rei had ever met, and he stared up at Seiya in awe. Was this...how he truly saw Rei? He didn't see the type to lie, but Rei just couldn't accept it.

"Plus—you came to see me," Seiya added, perhaps detecting Rei's suspicions. Still, Rei couldn't believe him.

"That's...really all?"

"All?" That's more than enough, don't you think? Not to mention, people tell me all the time I've got a good eye." He punctuated this declaration with another blinding smile.

Rei felt something deep inside his chest warm in the face of that expression, urging him to return the smile himself—which cause the tears he'd been fighting back to at last overflow their banks.

"...So? You'll be my assistant?"

'If this man believes in me... then I'll do anything for him...' This thought, welling up from within, was the final push he needed, and he nodded.

And that is how, from that day on, Rei became Seiya's personal assistant.

The house was a grand three-story building, and likely out of consideration for ensuring its occupants' privacy, it was difficult to tell from the outside what was going on within. However, along with the usual collection of windows along the crisp white outer walls, thin skylights could also be seen, making it easy to imagine the bright sunlight streaming inside.

"Welcome home; this is where you'll be living from now on," Seiya said, opening the door to the side of the garage—which to Rei seemed more like a gate leading to a whole new world, and with some trepidation, he followed Seiya into the inner entryway.

Truthfully, it still hadn't quite sunk in yet—which was to be expected; after all, it had barely been three days since he'd first met Seiya and been invited to be his assistant. But in that short span of time, the environment around Rei had shifted dramatically, exposing Rei to probably the most shocking changes he'd experienced since slipping from his mother's womb. That's how sudden and massive a change this was.

The time that had stalled with his mother's passing seemed to have suddenly started flowing again at great speed, and Seiya carried out all of the necessities using staff members from his own, self-run agency, SenaPro. He'd taken care of canceling the contract for the apartment Rei had been living in, transferring his ID card information, even his mother's burial arrangements... More than anything, Rei had been so glad to be able to hold a proper memorial service for his mother at last. Because he hadn't had any savings, he hadn't been able to bury her, after all, even after the mandated 49 days had passed.

And then, on top of everything, he'd come to welcome Rei...

"This is the living room—come inside." Seiya welcomed him in with a warm smile, and every time Rei met that expression, something warm and light blossomed within his chest.

'Starting from today... I'm going to be living my life in time with his...' Such thoughts just bubbled up unbidden.

He still couldn't manage to see himself as pure-hearted a person as Seiya had claimed that night in the dressing room, but he had vowed to change his life for Seiya's sake, at the very least. He would pour himself fully into living for Seiya, this he promised.

Until—

"Don't tell my you've actually taken in a stray *human* this time!" A bracing but sweet voice cut through the air, and Rei whirled around in the speaker's direction—where he was met with a woman of unparalleled beauty. It was immediately clear that this woman was the great actress—and Seiya's wife—Sena Nagisa.

Seiya had said he'd already spoken with his family and gotten their permission, assuring Rei that Nagisa would welcome him with open arms, but given this remark just now, she certainly didn't seem all that happy that a stranger was barging into her home.

However, it still somehow seemed...completely *normal*. In fact, Seiya was the strange one here, inviting a person he'd just met to come live and work with him. Rei steeled himself, understanding this to be only the first of many hurdles he'd likely be met with.

"Now, now. Rei-kun, this is my wife, Nagisa." He spoke in a soothing manner, and Rei dipped his head into a polite bow. Even if he couldn't earn Nagisa's favor right off the bat, if he worked hard and honestly, he was sure he'd eventually be able to.

Or at least—that's what he'd *thought*.

"I'm Sagara Rei. I hope we can—UWAH!" He cut off his introduction as Nagisa slipped in close, her face right in front of his, and stepped back from her with a startled cry.

"Hmmmm..." She looked him over, as if evaluating a piece of merchandise she was strongly considering purchasing.

Rei felt the urge to flee well up inside but knew it wouldn't do for him to look away just now and met Nagisa's gaze head-on, taking care to ensure it didn't look like he was glaring at her.

And then, after a long moment, Nagisa's expression broke into an excited grin. "Marvelous! He's absolutely gorgeous! Yes yes, he'll do quite nicely! Oh, every day is just going to be grand, now!"

".....I'm sorry?" Rei gaped at Nagisa, who had her hands clasped before her.

'...Gorgeous? Grand?'

"Right? I knew you'd like him!"

"Oh you know me *so* well, Dear!"

Rei stood there in silent confusion, glancing back and forth in shock between the grinning couple. He was certainly glad that Nagisa seemed eager to welcome him into their home now, yes, but...just...

'Are...all celebrities like this...? Seiya's suggestion that I be his assistant came out the blue as well, so maybe...'

They just seemed so *flighty*, or to at least have a *very* different set of values from Rei, and while this attitude was much better than finding them cruel-hearted, when Rei realized that he'd be working with people like this every day from now on...a whisper of worry began to bubble up.

"Ooh, but don't you think he might be more useful headlining for the agency?"

"True enough—how about it, Rei-kun?"

"Eh?" Rei's head tilted in confusion, not really grasping what was being asked.

"I'd initially thought about hiring you as an assistant—but perhaps you might like to be one of our agency's stars, instead?"

"I—wha—?!"

A *star*? Rei hesitated, never having expected to be offered such an opportunity, and quickly shook his head. "A—a star, that's just—out of the question! Please let me be your assistant!"

"You heard the man."

"Eeh...? Aww, boo. Although—it certainly will be nice to come home after a long day of work and find a pretty face waiting for me!" Nagisa's lips had pursed into a disappointed frown for a moment, before quickly breaking into a grin as she found the silver lining to the matter. Rei, though, had no idea of how to respond to the concept of 'being nice' just by being there—and as he offered a nervous smile in return, a clatter from behind their group caught his attention.

He turned in place—and found a small child, perhaps in his early years of elementary school, peeking out from around a corner.

"Oh, there you are, Izumi! Come over here, I'll introduce you." Seiya held out a hand, noticing the boy, who finally came toddling out. "This is Sagara Rei-kun; he'll be living with us starting today. Rei-kun, this is my son, Izumi."

Rei felt a silent thrill of surprise rush through him. The child was so adorable, Rei had been certain he'd been Seiya's *daughter*, not his son. As to be expected of the offspring of Seiya and Nagisa! He was a beautiful child, with doll-like features. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Izumi-san." He held out his hand in welcome to the Izumi, who continued to fidget while slowly drawing near.

After a few moments raking his curious gaze over Rei, he flushed deeply and silently extended a hand to Rei.

'He's a really shy little kid...' Careful not to startle, Rei gently gripped the hand, finding it a bit sweaty with the high body heat of a child.

"Izumi's 8 years old, a third-year in elementary school. His older brother's studying abroad at the moment, so he's a little lonely. I hope you won't mind keeping him company?"

"Not at all, I'd love to." He nodded to demonstrate his understanding of Seiya's request. He'd never played with children before, so truthfully, he was a bit concerned on that end, but he could hardly confess as such. For the time being, he'd just borrow a few books on rearing children from the library—after all, he'd vowed to give his everything for Seiya...

And so, his life in the Sena household began.

"Hey, Rei?"

Rei glanced up from the text he'd been perusing at Izumi's voice. It was a Saturday afternoon, and Izumi had been scribbling at the table in the living room, enjoying his day off from school, while Rei watched over him and did a bit of studying.

It had already been two months since he'd started living with the Senas, and Izumi had taken to Rei so keenly that it made his initial fidgety shyness seem like a farce, spending most of his days off now with Rei.

The Senas had a housemaid who dropped by every day, taking care of the cooking and cleaning and washing, and the office side of the house had proper staff taking care of the business there, so Rei had few responsibilities. Nagisa had her own manager, and Seiya was largely involved in producing these days, so he spent most of his time in the recording studio of the house's basement, putting together songs.

Rei's responsibilities therefore largely involved manning the phones when the office staff were out and occasionally accompanying Seiya when he went on errands and getting his license from driving school. And, of course, watching Izumi.

"Lookie, lookie!" He held up his drawing for Rei to see.

Rei didn't think himself possessed of any particular talent for the arts...but he never could seem to grasp what it was Izumi had drawn. It wasn't that it was too abstract for him, it was more...well, it was rude to think of this given that Izumi seemed to enjoy drawing so much—but it looked like something he'd drawn with his non-dominant hand, a really *truly* awful drawing.

But there was no way he would ever say as such. "It's magnificent; I particularly like the colors." He tried to decipher what the boy had drawn—probably not an animal, so a person? He chuckled softly at the thought, and Izumi returned to his sketching in high spirits from the praise.

Rei turned back to the accounting text he had in his hands and dropped his eyes to the page, determined to drill into his mind *something* that might help him prove useful to Seiya. It was that thought that drove him to fill his free time with studies.

He couldn't help but think that he was just taking advantage of Seiya's good graces right now. But if he put his nose to the grindstone and studied hard and got his license, then he would one day be able to *do* something for Seiya.

"Studying, are we?"

Rei glanced up in surprise when a voice called out to him. "...Ah, Seiya-san. Are you on break?"

"Oh—not quite, I just had something to give you." Rei stood to put on some tea or coffee for the man, but Seiya held out a hand to stop him.

"...For me?" He cocked his head slightly in confusion.

"Yup. Here you are." He held out a large envelope.

"This is..."

"A pamphlet—for a correspondence college."

"Eh—?!" *College?* Rei's eyes goggled—and he noticed now the seal of a university printed on the envelope. But...why would Seiya give him something like this...?

"I've seen how eager you are with your studies, so I thought maybe this way you'd be able to work and go to school at the same time...?" Seiya offered to Rei, who stood stiff with shock, unable to take it all in.

He had a point; with correspondence courses, he could probably get in a decent education while still working as he was now. After all, he already had a book open in his lap this very moment while he was watching Izumi.

"B—but, the tuition..."

"Well naturally, I'll have you work it off!" he responded with a bright smile.

".....!" Rei felt tears well up within, so happy was he. *'This man gives me anything and everything I could possibly desire... He really is like an angel...'* Even telling Rei he'd have to work off the tuition had made him happy. He probably understood that if he'd offered to fund Rei's education for free, Rei would have flat-out refused. And indeed, Rei was sure that if Seiya had said that, he would have felt he had no right to receive such charity.

If Rei had had a father...maybe this is what it would have felt like. He could only imagine, but if he'd had someone like Seiya for a father, he was sure he would have been happy.

"I'll study as best I can!"

"Excellent! But don't overwork yourself, okay?"

"Of course!" As he nodded emphatically, Seiya favored him with another brilliant smile.

"Hey hey~" Izumi tugged on Rei's sleeve, having slipped down from his chair while Rei had been overwhelmed with gratitude. Perhaps he'd been a bit lonely at being abandoned.

"What's the matter, Izumi-san?" Rei squatted slightly to peer into Izumi's face—something he'd read about in a book on raising children, back when he'd first arrived. Seeing as he hadn't known the first thing about looking after children, he'd thought it best to do a bit of light reading on the subject. Izumi had turned out to be quite a bit more introverted than most children, so there were times when he slipped up in trying to force Izumi outside as advised in the books, but given how taken Izumi was with him, he figured he must be doing something right.

"What's a college?"

"It's a type of school."

"School...? Are you goin' to school, Rei?"

His expression darkened with worry, and Seiya gently patted him on the head. "No, he's not going anywhere. This house is going to be Rei's school."

At this, Izumi turned his gaze to his father. "The house? Then he's gonna stay here all the time?"

"Indeed." He gave a smiling nod in response to Izumi's question, and Izumi instantly brightened into a wide grin.

"Thank goodness!"

Seeing their interaction Rei recalled here that Izumi's older brother was currently studying abroad; perhaps Izumi had feared that Rei would leave like his brother had.

"You must really love Rei, Izumi."

"Yup!" Izumi gave a smart nod, and Seiya reached out and patted him again on the head, glancing over at Rei.

"...Thank you, Rei."

"...Huh?" Rei's eyes widened in shock at the unexpected offer of gratitude. It was one thing for *him* to thank *Seiya*—but he could think of nothing he'd done himself to merit the opposite.

At Rei's confusion, Seiya smiled gently. "For keeping Izumi company."

"Eh? But that's just part of—I mean, it's only natural." He'd been about to say it was merely part of the job, but then wondered if it was right to say such a thing in front of Izumi.

"Yeah. Thanks, though." And saying this, he reached forward and casually patted Rei on the head as well—and while it was the same thing he'd done to Izumi only moments before, Rei felt a shudder ripple through him as his cheeks flushed with heat. Perhaps because he could never recall having his head rubbed before?

Rather than feeling irritated at being treated like a child...he more immediately felt pride and joy at being praised.

"Well then, I suppose I'll get back to work now."

"O—of course, please don't push yourself too hard!" He stood with Izumi and watched Seiya leave the living room before turning his gaze once more to the envelope still sitting on the table. "...All right then...!" And with a rising urge to study even harder now, he formed a fist with his right hand.

In this manner, Rei's days continued to pass, consisting of light office work, watching Izumi, and studying. The only major change now was that, since acquiring his driver's license, he now had more opportunities to drive Seiya around town—moments that were the most enjoyable for Rei.

"So, what next?" Seiya had just finished singing a song requested by Rei and offered to continue, inviting a wry smile from Rei.

"We're very nearly to the studio now; won't you be tired, singing nonstop like this?"

"It's fine! I'm not belting it out or anything here." Ever since Rei had mentioned that he loved hearing Seiya sing, the man had started serenading him in the car whenever they went out. Rei loved moments like these, where he got to monopolize Seiya's singing voice. His heart always felt warm and light when they were together, and the feeling was multiplied several times over in moments such as this.

These songs that helped him back to his feet...Seiya's voice, which had saved him. Every time he heard Seiya sing, he felt his feelings for Seiya grow all the stronger in time to his awe and adoration. And not just feelings that one usually felt towards a savior, but something closer to the love one felt for a parent.

But then...it happened. It was an evening in June, some six months or so after Rei had come to live with the Sena family.

Izumi had professed being scared of monsters, and so Rei had offered that evening to stay with him until he fell asleep. Apparently ghost stories had been gaining popularity among his classmates, and Izumi had happened to hear one of them. Rei had sat at his bedside, intending to simply wait for Izumi to fall asleep, but seeing how poor Izumi had trembled fiercely the moment he turned out the lights, begging, "Sleep with me, Rei?", he'd slipped into bed with the boy himself.

Perhaps that had been where he'd made his mistake—for before he realized it, he had slipped off to sleep as well. He'd woken again as Izumi wiggled about in his sleep, and upon remembering where he was, he sat up in Izumi's bed.

"I wonder what time it is..." He glanced to the bedside, where an alarm clock decorated to look like some character or another sat, giving off a faint green glow that lit its face to display the time: 2 in the morning. It seemed he'd taken a rather long nap indeed.

He huffed a soft sigh before slipping out of the bed, careful not to wake Izumi, and then quietly crept out of the room.

But as he wandered down the spacious hallway, headed for the stairs to lead up to his bedroom on the third floor, he heard a sound coming from the other end of the hall—and drew to a stop, curious. What could be going on in the middle of the night?

He took a few more steps closer—before he realized where the sound was coming from: Seiya and Nagisa's bedroom. “.....!”

His heart did a furious somersault in his chest, and he felt a flush wash over himself from head to toe. Panicking, he quickly turned on his heel and made a break for the stairs, taking care not to make a sound. Once he reached his room, he dove onto the bed and buried himself in the sheets, covering up. And even though he *knew* he shouldn't still be able to hear anything anymore, he slapped his hands over his ears.

But this only served to make the sounds he'd heard moments before echo all the more loudly inside his mind.

He urged himself to stop thinking about it, but it was no use—quite the contrary, he couldn't help *imagining*, picturing what was going on in that bedroom right at this very moment.

Seiya and Nagisa were a married couple; it was hardly out of the ordinary for them to do such things, and the fact that he was even *thinking* this much about it just proved how low and vulgar he was—it made him want to *weep*. To top it all off, no matter how hard he tried to scrub it from his memory, he couldn't help the images of Seiya that rose to fill his mind, unbidden.

He wondered—did Seiya wear an expression no one else ever saw when he had Nagisa pinned beneath him? Something beyond that usual gentle, angelic smile he offered everyone else...?

“Stop *thinking* about it...!” he hissed in reprimand, but this failed to chase away the images in his mind...

Rei didn't get much sleep that night.

The next morning came.

“Good morning, Rei-kun,” Seiya called as Rei wandered into the living room carrying the breakfast he'd helped the housekeeper prepare to the dining room table, and Rei's shoulders twitched in surprise.

“...Good morning,” he managed to reply, but he couldn't bring himself to face Seiya head-on, his mind still replaying his fanciful imaginings of Seiya from the night before. It felt like if their eyes met, Seiya would see right through him and be devastated with disappointment in him.

And yet...

“Rei-kun? You're not looking so good...are you feeling all right?” Seiya drew closer to the dining table, calling out to Rei suddenly and lifting a hand to his head, as if to take his temperature.

Rei froze stiff as a board at the unexpected brush of flesh, eyes going wide with shock.

“Hmm, doesn't feel like you have a fever...” As he mumbled to himself, though, Seiya's breath brushed over Rei's cheek—and that was *it*.

“...!!” He felt the blood in his veins begin to boil, and his heart was pounding a thudding tattoo in his chest, setting his entire body to shivering.

‘...*Oh no...*’

“I—I'm sorry, I'm not feeling well. I'll be resting in my room today!” And with that, he fled the living room, confining himself within the walls of his own room and flinging himself onto his bed, just as he'd done the night before. “Why...?!”

His heart wouldn't stop its pounding, and his whole body felt so *hot*. He wanted to weep. “I can't do this... This is *wrong*...!” And yet all the same, his hand crept down to his groin, unsnapping the buttons to his pants and sliding down the zipper.

“Ah...” Somewhere along the way, he'd already started to stiffen. “You've gotta be kidding me...!” He couldn't *believe* himself. It had been nothing more than a brush of breath over his cheek—for *that* to make him like this was just... And to make matters worse, it was over *Seiya*, the man he revered beyond anyone else. The man he wanted to be *happy* more than anyone else. That beautiful, angelic man.

And here he'd gone and imagined that person in all manner of sexual situations, feeling *these* sorts of dirty desires for him...it was *sacrilege*!

Yet all the same, his body rebuffed the desires of his heart as his hand slipped under the hem of his underwear. “Haa-ah...”

Seiya's hand against his forehead...his breath along Rei's cheek... It was hardly the first time Rei had experienced either, but the moment they overlapped with the image of Seiya he had in his mind, an almost *violent* pleasure began to bloom.

“No...no....!” he whimpered softly, but he couldn't stop his hand from groping between his legs. It felt *amazing*, better than any sexual experience he'd yet had. “Why...why is this...?”

His squeezed softly at his shaft, already glistening with precum, and began to massage the hard length up and down. In the back of his mind rose images of those strangely-colored eyes and the sound of that lovely voice calling his name. “Aah—nn...nngh...!”



He climaxed in short order, but with his release came fat, wet tears dripping from his eyes. “m...so...rry, Seiya-san...so sorry...”

It was here that he finally realized...that he loved Seiya. And not love in the sense of a son towards a father—but *romantic*, sexual love. “How did this...why...?”

He had no clue when he’d started to see Seiya that way, but...maybe it had been from the moment he’d heard the man sing. Maybe all this time, he’d just been trying to *convince* himself it was love for a father from a child.

‘...I didn’t want to realize it...’

After all, Seiya already had Nagisa, and more so, Rei was a *man*.

But the biggest problem now...was that if Seiya ever found out how Rei felt about him—Rei would no longer be able to live here together with him.

“No...I don’t want that. I want to be by his side forever...!” He didn’t *care* if Seiya didn’t love him in a romantic sense; he just wanted to be *needed*, to *help* Seiya. He wanted to pour his whole heart into making Seiya happy. Even if it was wrong to feel the things he did for Seiya, the vow he’d made that day he’d stepped through the door had been *true*.

“I...will keep this secret, at *all* costs.” If that was what it took for him to stay by Seiya’s side, then so be it, and vowing to tamp down for the rest of his life these feelings he’d only just begun to recognize, he slipped off the bed to wash the hands he’d dirtied with his passion.

Two months passed, and then one August day, Rei found himself at the airport, bidding, “Well, I’m off now!”

Except he wasn’t the one boarding a plane; he’d only come here to see off Seiya, Nagisa, and Izumi, who were using their summer vacation time to head to Fukuoka to visit Nagisa’s family and do some grave tending. Rei had been invited along as well, initially, but he’d instead promised to watch over the house and stayed behind alone. With the housekeeper for SenaPro also taking her summer vacation now, the house would be otherwise unoccupied.

Ever since *that day*, Rei had worked to keep a calm, relaxed exterior while consoling himself with thoughts of Seiya when he found himself alone at night. His desire to stay by Seiya’s side for always hadn’t changed—but having to hide his feelings for the man was starting to take an emotional toll. It helped nothing that this was something he couldn’t even discuss with the one person he trusted more than anyone else.

As such, when the opportunity presented itself for him to be alone for a while, he leapt, thinking that it might not be such a bad thing, spending some quality time with himself.

“Have a nice flight; do take care.” He waved the trio off in the departure lobby before exiting the building and heading back to the Sena home in the car alone.

Stepping into the quiet, empty genkan and locking the door behind him, Rei felt as if a great weight had finally been lifted from his shoulders. “Guess it’s good to let the air out of the tires now and then huh...” With these words, he soothed the guilty knot lodged in his chest and headed for the living room.

It was empty—which wasn’t abnormal; about this time on most weekdays when Seiya and Nagisa were working and Izumi was at school, Rei often found himself alone here. So it *shouldn’t* have felt strange, and yet...

“...Something...feels kind of ‘off’...” Thinking about how no one would be back for a long while made the space feel...so empty. But Rei had spent 18 years with that sense of loneliness before he came here. It was the past 8 months which had been out of the ordinary, when he stopped to think about it.

“Maybe Seiya-san felt the same way...” His easy approval of Rei’s suggestion that he stay behind may have been founded on the belief that if this was what Rei truly wanted, then he should have it. He’d taken into consideration the fact that Rei had been alone all this time and understood that he needed some time to himself now and then.

This was Seiya, so that was a more than logical explanation; Seiya always had a knack for giving Rei *just* what he wanted. Though unfortunately...he couldn’t give Rei the one thing he desired more than anything else...

Rei gave a wry smile at these thoughts. Even so far away from Seiya, his thoughts never seemed to leave the man. After all, the very reason he was here, alive right now, was all thanks to Seiya, so it was only natural.

But he finally had some time to himself, so he ought to take it easy and not worry about *anything*—so he headed to the kitchen to make himself an iced coffee.

“Wow, the weather’s great today...” The report had said that the next three days would be full of bright, summery weather. If he’d still been stuck in the air conditioner-less apartment he’d lived in last year, he would no doubt have been cursing the forecast, but now that he was inside a cool, air-conditioned home, he had no particular plans to head outside.

Glancing up at the sunny, bright blue skies above, the words that came to mind made him sound like a proper housewife: *a perfect day to do some laundry!* Though honestly, he didn’t have much to wash himself.

“Oh yeah...!” Seiya and the others would be back the next day, so maybe he ought to lay out everyone’s futons to air in the sun. Yes, that

wasn't a bad idea at all! The housekeeper was an older woman, and the veranda for airing out futons was on the third floor; as such, Rei generally was the one to offer his help in carrying the futons up to air in the sun, so he understood how to go about the business.

He first laid out his own futon, since his room was on the same floor as the veranda, and then proceeded to Seiya and Nagisa's bedroom. Given that he knew no one was around, he didn't knock, merely walking straight in. But as he approached the beds, just as he always did, he suddenly came to an abrupt stop—and his heart skipped a beat.

“.....”

He'd seen these beds dozens of times while coming into this room to clean or hang out the futons. But today...

“There's no one around...so just a little bit surely won't hurt...right?” he murmured to himself, and then took a flying leap onto Seiya's bed, his heartbeat rising as he did so. He lay facedown on the comforter and inhaled deeply, taking in the fresh scent of laundry detergent and a faint whiff of Seiya's own personal scent. He knew this was a *bad* idea, but he couldn't help giving a sharp sniff to inhale it.

“Smells like Seiya-san...” At these words, a thrilling shudder ran through his lower body, and after a moment's hesitation, he let his hand slide down between his legs.

He felt well and truly like a pervert now, but in these past two months, the notion that using thoughts of Seiya to satisfy himself was wrong, was *taboo*, had begun to fade.

He slipped his fingers under the hem of his pants and took himself in hand—then closed his eyes and began to leisurely stroke himself, keeping all his focus on the scent of Seiya.

“Aahn...Seiya-san...Seiya-san...!” He lost complete control at finally uttering the name he never allowed himself to voice, even when pleasuring himself in the privacy of his own room. Slicking his fingers with the precum now glistening at the tip, he began to probe further behind himself, and despite thinking himself deplorable, he could bear it no more, and curling himself into a ball, he pressed a finger inside. “Hhaa...ahn...nna...”

Irritated that he couldn't reach very deep by his own ministrations, he soothed himself by working his fingers both in front and behind. However—

“Se...ya-sa...”

Just as he was about to climax—

“Ooh, that looks like *fun*~”



Rei's eyes flared wide at the voice calling out to him all of a sudden. "Wh—who are...?!" He quickly sat up, glancing over to where the

voice had come from—the entrance to the room—where a boy stood.

“Huh? You mean you haven’t heard about me?” He cocked his head in confusion.

“Ah...”

“Well I’ve definitely heard *all* about you from my dad...” Even before he heard the word *dad*, though, Rei realized instantly from the fact that he had Seiya’s eyes and similar appearance...that this was the eldest Sena son, currently studying abroad.

Sena Shougo, age 16—three years Rei’s junior.

“...Shougo...-san...?” The moment realization settled in, though, all of the blood fled his face, and he scrambled to hide his lower half with a small towel. Not that it helped anything, as it was glaringly obvious what he’d just been doing.

“Huh? You look awfully pale...you okay?”

“Wh...why are you...?” Nerves had sapped his throat dry, leaving his voice sounding raspy. He hadn’t heard a *word* from the Senas about their eldest coming home to visit.

“Hmm? Oh—you mean why am I here? Weeeell, y’see, I’m on summer vacation right now, so I thought it might be fun to come home for a visit!” He drew closer to the bed with a light step, grinning broadly.

Rei struggled to figure out what he was supposed to do now, keeping a close eye on Shougo. All he could think about was that Shougo had *seen* him, had *found out* about the feelings Rei had for Seiya—and with a mind so full of such panicked thoughts, he had no freedom to consider anything else.

“So you’re my dad’s new assistant, huh? You love my dad?”

“.....” Rei’s fingers clenched tighter around the towel in his lap at hearing his feelings so casually voiced.

“...Though, heh, I guess you wouldn’t be doing this kinda thing if you didn’t, huh!” He nodded to himself, as if concurring with his own logic, but his expression betrayed not an ounce of ill feeling—in fact, his smiling face seemed to suggest he was *enjoying* this, which only served to stir up Rei’s confusion even further.

Wouldn’t most people be more upset at finding their father’s *male* assistant jerking himself off in said father’s bedroom while home alone? And yet here Shougo stood, just grinning happily as he settled himself casually on the bed.

And then— “You want me to help you out there?”

“.....What?” He certainly hadn’t expected to hear *that*; in fact, he couldn’t *believe* it. *Help*?

Help...with what? Airing out the futons? And yet while he knew that couldn’t be what the boy meant, given the situation he’d just been found in, Rei’s thoughts jumped to ridiculous conclusions in the face of such an inexplicable development.

“You didn’t get to cum, right? Because I interrupted you? Sorry ‘bout that~” Shougo reached forward and clasped the dumbfounded Rei by the shoulder—and then eased him down onto his back. It was only then, seeing Shougo staring down at him, the he finally twigged to what Shougo was offering.

“W—wait, I...”

“Oh yeah—what’s your name again? I’m pretty sure my dad mentioned it before...”

Rei had raised an arm, preparing to shove Shougo away, but froze solid at these words. It felt like a cold hand sliding down his spine at the words *my dad*, and while Shougo might not have used them on purpose, it was still more than enough to give Rei pause.

If Shougo, for whatever reason, told Seiya about this...his efforts these past two months to hide his feelings would have been for naught. It was this thought that froze him in place.

“Hey, c’mon—what’s your name?”

“...Sagara...Rei.”

“Gotcha...Rei.”

“.....!!” Rei’s eyes widened at the way Shougo called his name here, using a lower register than before.

“Dead ringer, right??” Shougo grinned wildly as Rei gaped at him. A dead ringer, indeed. And it wasn’t just the voice that resembled Seiya’s, it was his general appearance, his smile even... Though perhaps that was a given, seeing as they were father and son. “I don’t care if you imagine I’m my dad~”

“I—I could never...” But Shougo darted forward and stole a light peck, staring into Rei’s eyes—where he was forced to notice that they were the same strange shade as Seiya’s. Imagine that Shougo...was Seiya? He could never do that, could never *allow* himself to.

And yet...even as Shougo reached forward to slip his fingers under the towel covering Rei’s lap, he didn’t move a muscle—for a different

reason now than before.

“Did I spook you that much? You’re all soft now...” As he spoke, he brushed fingers along Rei’s shaft, now limp from shock and fear.

“A—ah...” But as Shougo curled his fingers around him, palming him gently, a numbing shudder rippled through his hips.

“Don’t worry...I’ll make you feel a lot better soon. It’s my first time with a guy, but I’m kind of a natural at this kinda thing...”

“Th—that’s not the prob...” —*lem*, he’d tried to protest, but his body began to respond to Shougo’s ministrations. “Nngh...”

“S that feel good?”

Rei shook his head in reply, but the truth was exactly the opposite. He’d been close to climax already, after all, but he couldn’t discount the influence of finally being touched by someone other than himself for the first time in ages.

Yet even that couldn’t explain it all.

“Hngh...ngh...—!” Shougo, with his eyes just like Seiya’s, a similar appearance, and that *voice*... The moment these sights touched his eyes and sounds filled his ears, he couldn’t help but sit up and take notice. It made him think *what if it was Seiya touching me right now...*

The notion that this was *wrong*, rather than quelling his desire, only served to turn him on even *more*, and he found himself feeling even more sensitive than usual.

“C’mon, you don’t have to try to keep quiet...” Despite his way of speaking being completely different from that of Seiya, Rei’s lips still quivered with desire when Shougo whispered to him.

“Ha—ah...aa—ah...!” Rei let out a keening moan as Shougo stroked him with more strength. At this rate, he was going to cum in no time. “N—o, let...go...”

“Now why would you want me to do that? You should just cum like this~” He stroked a deft finger over the liquid seeping from the tip of Rei’s cock, sliding his palm back down the shaft to spread it around, and as he drew it back gently up toward the head from the root, Rei felt strength pooling in his toes. “There you go, just cum...Rei.”

“Ya—ah...!” He clenched his fingers in the towel, quickly spurting his release into the palm of Shougo’s hand. “Haa...ha—ah...”

Shougo gently pried the towel from Rei’s hands as he lay there utterly exhausted and panting heavily, dropping it beside the bed before Rei could protest. “Mm, that was definitely nice~ I’d heard you were gorgeous, but this is way more than I expected! And so sexy too!”

“Don’...look at...me...” He twisted his body into a ball, but Shougo reached forward and grabbed for Rei’s arm before he could shield his face.

“But you’ve got such a beautiful face! Why’d you want to go and hide it? What a waste!” As he spoke, he peered curiously into Rei’s face, and unable to bear being stared at with those eyes that were just like Seiya’s, he squeezed his lids shut—which prompted a soft snicker from Shougo. “You know, when you sit there with your eyes shut like that...it makes you look like you’re waiting for someone to kiss you~”

“Wha—that’s the most ridicu—”

But Shougo pressed an audible kiss to his lips, sliding his tongue between the lips that had been about to protest the suggestion. Shougo swept his tongue lazily around Rei’s mouth, along his teeth and inner jaw.

Rei felt a shudder ripple down his spine as Shougo sought out his weak spots. “Hng...nnm...!” To be completely undone as he was by a kiss from a boy three years his junior...he hated to even *conceive* of the notion. But Shougo was proving exceedingly skilled, and Rei felt himself being swept away, with nowhere to run.

As Rei’s consciousness was being carried off by the kiss, Shougo’s fingers slipped under his t-shirt to push it up further. “....—!” He rubbed the flat palm of his hand over Rei’s sunken stomach, causing his abs to jerk and quiver in response, before moving to massage the skin leisurely, sliding up until he brushed lightly over Rei’s chest. His nipples had just begun to peak from the attentions, when Shougo grasped them in his fingers and proceeded to pinch them lightly.



"Nngh—...!" A nasal keen worked its way from his throat, and Rei's cheeks flared red with shame. The dull pain mingled with pleasure as Shougo tweaked his nipples caused his shoulders to shake, and Shougo—perhaps fearing that Rei was going to bite his tongue soon—finally released him from the kiss. "Ha..ngh—!"

Compared to Rei, huffing and out of breath from the effort, Shougo seemed rather calm and collected. "...Huh, so I guess even guys get turned on from their nipples..." Shougo's amazement at learning this fact, though, only served to compound Rei's embarrassment. "I never realized they could get so...pointy."

"A—ah!" Rei let out a yelp as Shougo reached forward and rolled the tip of a nipple between his fingers.

"Wonder what'd happen if I sucked on one..."

"D...on..." Shougo placed his lips over one, as if it kiss it, and swiped his tongue over the tip. On the heels of a slight, uneasy shudder, though, came pure pleasure, and despite having just climaxed only moments earlier, Rei felt heat begin to build again in his groin.

Laving one nipple with a generous layer of saliva, Shougo began to twist it in his fingers as he turned his attentions to the other, proceeding to suckle on it.

"Hya—...!" Pleasure sharp enough to paralyze began to bubble up, but as Rei contorted his body, Shougo soothingly lapped at his nipples to calm him. "Ah—ah..." Stimulated at once by both Shougo's tongue and fingers, Rei felt as if he were being crushed, and his body twitched with shudders.

"Damn you're adorable like this..." Shougo snickered softly, continuing to tease Rei's chest mercilessly.

Rei bit his lip in futile effort to fight back the pleasure rising within, but with every movement of those fingers and that tongue, his body shuddered, leaving Rei helpless to stop it. "Nn..ngh—nn...!"

"Hey, I kinda...feel like I'm at my limit here..."

"Wha...ah!" Shougo quickly sat up and lifted Rei's hips.

"I just stick it in here, right?"

"—wai...don—ah...!"

Shougo gently slipped a finger inside. "Wow...that went in easier than I thought it would. But then—you were just doing it to yourself earlier, weren't you?" Rei's cheeks again flushed with shame. "Ah, but you're still really tight inside... Looks like it'd feel *amazing...*"

"Hya...ah—! Shougo's fingers slid in deeper than Rei could reach on his own, twisting around to stretch him out and sending a shudder of intense pleasure bolting up Rei's spine and through his whole body. He couldn't help the loathsome longing that welled up within for Shougo to probe deeper, *harder*, his body shoving aside his heart to urge Shougo on in his endeavors.

His hips bucked, greedily sucking Shougo's fingers in even deeper, and despite the shame, despite knowing he shouldn't be doing this, he still...

Whether Shougo recognized Rei's internal conflict or not, he continued to enflame Rei's body with skill that seemed to suggest he'd been outright lying in his claim to have never been with a man before. However...

"...Mind I put it in now?"

"....." He *really* wished Shougo wouldn't *ask* things like that so unflinchingly.

"Rei....?" He heart shuddered at the sound of his name being called. This wasn't *Seiya* he was with right now, but he still couldn't object when Shougo looked at him with *those eyes*.

"Just...do it..." And with that, he clenched his eyes shut in a desperate attempt to ignore the color of Shougo's eyes, to ignore *what he was doing*.

The fingers slid out easily, and Shougo lined himself up—the slickness that pressed against him must have been from the lubricant covering the condom. "Ah—ahh...!"

Shougo slowly pressed in, patiently sliding inside as something far thicker than any finger filled him up bit by bit. "Hnnng...nn—ngh..."

"Can you...tell I'm all...in now?" Rei unthinkingly clenched tight around Shougo in response to the murmured words, and Shougo inhaled sharply.

"A—ah! ...*Don'*—nnaah...!" Shougo jerked himself out—before quickly sliding in again, plunging deeper this time, and Rei felt himself once again at the mercy of Shougo's unexpectedly forceful movements and the pleasure his actions wrought, sounds he would be ashamed to hear himself make leaking from his throat.

"Rei...Rei—...!" The way Shougo kept *calling his name* like that muddled his senses, letting him delude himself into thinking for at least a moment that it really *was* Seiya's voice saying these things.

Seiya would *never* do this with him, and he was *painfully* aware that it was *Shougo* here with him right now. Yet, all the same...

It felt like he was losing both his body and mind, destroyed by the pleasure that was driving him insane. Shougo plunged in still deeper with one punching thrust, and Rei climaxed instantly, without even needing to have his cock touched, and—

“*Seiya-san...!*” he called unconsciously, before losing himself to darkness completely...

3

Chapter 3

Rei felt his consciousness slowly return, as if rising back to the surface from deep beneath the water, and his eyes popped open as he woke. “.....”

He experienced a sudden flash of awareness—but despite finally being wake, he continued to lay on his back, staring blankly ahead at the darkness before him with no thoughts clouding his mind.

He hadn’t the faintest clue where he was, save that it was dark all around, making it difficult to discern his surroundings. But his eyes slowly adjusted to the low light until he could faintly make out a ceiling—one, he realized, that was not quite the ceiling he was familiar with.

His body felt heavy—and strangely enough, a bit refreshed as well. ‘*What...happened to me?*’ And where *was* he? But just as he was wondering these things—

“Moooorning~! You awake?”

“.....?!” With the voice suddenly calling out to him, the lamp on the side table sparked to life, sending Rei whirling around in surprise to face the direction from which the voice had come.

There he saw someone with features remarkably similar to those of Sena Seiya, the man Rei cherished over all others—but a young man, the Sena family’s eldest son, Sena Shougo. Taking in the bright grin Shougo was favoring him with, everything came back to Rei all of a sudden.

The fact that he’d been masturbating on Seiya’s bed, how Shougo had caught him at it, and...how he’d wound up subsequently sleeping with Shougo.

All of the blood fled his face in an instant—what had he *done*?! Distraught as he might have been to be caught masturbating, he couldn’t imagine how he’d let himself get so carried away as to go all the way like that with Shougo.

He’d *ruined everything* now. It was *over*.

He’d dared to lay a hand on Seiya’s—on his *employer’s* own child. There was no way he would be able to stay in this house any more. Hell, he’d probably be *fired* for the impropriety as well.

‘*I won’t..be able to stay by Seiya’s side any more...*’ This realization shook him so fiercely that he was less saddened by the news...and more in a state of blank shock.

Perhaps sensing Rei’s distress, Shougo peered down into his face, his own expression curious. “Hey...what’s wrong? You look sad...”

The thoughtless optimism in his voice snapped something inside of Rei. “...How can you ask that?!” He stood angrily from the bed, leveling a sharp glare at Shougo. “Just *look* at what I’ve done with Seiya-san’s own son... I can’t possibly stay on with SenaPro any longer!”

Shougo cocked his head to the side, clearly confused at Rei’s shout, tinged with what could only be described as sorrow.

“What you’ve done...wait, you mean the *sex*?”

“Of course!” At Shougo’s careless comment, Rei nodded with a bitter expression on his features.

“...But, why? Sex is just a casual form of communication, after all! Like—you know, just a way of greeting someone,” Shougo explained lightly as he dragged himself sleepily from the bed.

‘...*Just...a greeting...*?’ Rei gaped blankly at the unexpected response. He could wrap his mind around the concept of sex as a form of communication—but while he could understand using a kiss as a greeting gesture—for someone to use *sex* in that manner...? He wouldn’t say he’d never heard of anyone like that—but at the very least, they weren’t all that common.

“So—I don’t see what there is to worry about!”

“D—Don’t paint me as someone like yourself! Your morals are far too loose!” he snapped unthinkingly at the still-grinning Shougo. When he paused to think logically about the situation, he supposed he should be *happy* that Shougo wasn’t taking this matter seriously, and yet...

“Huh? But—it didn’t seem like I was the first guy you’d ever been with; you looked like you’d been around the block a few times

yourself.”

“That’s...!” Rei’s words caught in his throat at the way Shougo seemed to be almost *purposefully* pouting here—for Shougo wasn’t incorrect in his assumptions. “Th—that’s merely a product of my misbegotten youth, so—” But he quickly recovered, realizing he was being drawn into following Shougo’s pace in conversation. “Anyway! That’s not who I am anymore! I’ve *changed!*”

It was true, there *had* been a time when he’d slept around, but he’d left that person behind long ago—ever since meeting Seiya, ever since coming here...

He wasn’t the same man he had been before. Or at least...he’d *thought* he wasn’t...

“Whaaaaat? You’re just gonna let a sexy body like that go to waste? That’s the kind of thing that has you trying to jerk yourself off, because you’re all pent up! And on my dad’s bed of all places.”

Rei fell silent, struck dumb by *my dad’s bed* as all other words in Shougo’s comment faded away, and his shoulders slumped in defeat. After a few moments’ silence, he spoke again. “...You’re right. This is all my fault.” That’s how it was, when it all came down to it. He had no right to attack Shougo on this point; if he’d been more in control of himself, he could have avoided this whole mess. Besides, this was hardly the *first* time this had happened. “The fact that I harbor inappropriate feelings for Seiya-san...and that I laid a hand on a minor...is all my fault.” As he spoke, it sounded like he was reminding himself of this very fact.

“...Even though I’m the one who started it?”

Rei shook his head, brushing aside Shougo’s light excuse. “That doesn’t matter! It’s like the driver being at fault when he hits a pedestrian in a traffic accident—the elder partner is the one who deserves all the blame! And on top of that, I did it *with another man!* There’s no way this will be taken lightly!” His voice rose in tone to an impassioned shout, until the energy fled Rei and his shoulders slumped, his face tilted down.

What was he going to do now? He hadn’t even repaid Seiya a *tenth* of what he owed him as his savior... But with what had just transpired, he’d have to leave this home having caused the man nothing but trouble. It was *beyond* pathetic. Everything had been going so well, too...

“Oh, hey!” Rei cast a dangerous glare at Shougo, who’d interrupted his self-loathing with an irritating excited shout—but Shougo didn’t quail under his gaze, merely grinned broadly. “Then all we have to do is keep this a secret! Just between the two of us! Right?”

It was the last thing Rei had expected to hear. “...A secret?” He blinked several times in rapid succession at the words that amounted to no less than a ray of sunshine.

“Sure; a secret.”

“You’ll...keep quiet about this, then? And...about how I feel about Seiya-san...?”

“Yup! I promise!” Shougo responded, utterly open and honest and without a moment’s hesitation, and then thrust his pinky forward. “I’ll pinky swear, even!” The suggestion was so utterly childish that Rei couldn’t help but go along with it, and as he presented his own pinky, Shougo twined them together. “~Making a pinky promise, if you break it you have to drink a thousand needles~ There we go!” At the end of the childish nursery rhyme, Shougo broke the link, and Rei stared down at his finger, allowing a soft sigh of relief to escape.

It had been nothing more than a childish symbol of a promise made, and he had no way of knowing how serious or not Shougo had been in the gesture, but...it seemed he was genuine in his vow to keep quiet on the matter.

‘...I get to stay at SenaPro...’ He could still stay with Seiya... The relief that accompanied this realization nearly brought tears to his eyes, until—

“So, let’s do it again!”

“...Huh?” The tears he’d felt rising were immediately banked at Shougo’s words. ‘Again’?

“We’ve done it once, so what’s two or three times matter? I could barely hold myself back seeing how amazing you looked asleep!”

Rei could practically *hear* the heart mark that ended Shougo’s declaration, and he gaped blankly. Given the context, there was only *one* thing Shougo could be suggesting they do.

‘*Why would we do that?!*’ But before he could snap as such, he realized something—maybe...he had no right to refuse Shougo on this point. Shougo had been under no obligation to promise Rei he’d keep their secret, as he’d done just now. And from what he’d learned of Shougo so far, he didn’t seem the type who felt like he ought to keep any liaisons he had with men a secret from his parents.

Which meant this was less a secret kept for both their sakes...and more Shougo having the upper hand over Rei in this matter. As he glanced over at Shougo, he took in his expression which said he hadn’t a care in the world, simply smiling broadly at Rei.

“I figured you wouldn’t like it if I just jumped you while you were sleeping, so I held back~”

“.....” Rei bit back the urge to snap *As well you should!...Guess I’ve got no choice...*’

In order to ensure that Shougo kept his mouth shut...it looked like he was going to have to go along with his whims. He released a deep sigh in an attempt to calm himself. “...All right then. But *not* here.” Even though he knew they were all alone in the house, he couldn’t bear

to stay in this married couple's room any longer.

"Yessir~!"

And that is how this pair began their rather strange relationship.

The next day

"...Ah, guess it's about time, huh." He silenced the alarm he'd set (just in case) on his cell phone and closed the textbook in his lap. Today was the day the rest of the Sena family would be returning from their vacation.

Seeing as it had only been the day before when he'd engaged in *that* sort of activity, he was still quite exhausted both mentally and physically, but more than this, he was worried he wouldn't be able to entirely hide the fact that something had happened between himself and Shougo. That probably explained why he'd woken earlier than usual this morning as well.

On waking, he'd headed straight to Seiya and Nagisa's room to change their sheets and then laid out the futons to air, lastly dragging out the vacuum cleaner and giving the whole house a good cleaning in an effort to hide any evidence of their activities. After that, hoping to calm his nerves, he'd settled in to give his undivided attention to his textbook.

Shougo, in contrast, had poked his head out once early in the afternoon, searching for something to eat, before retreating back to his room for a nap. Given that he'd jumped into bed with Rei so soon after such a long journey, without pausing to rest, he supposed the exhaustion was simply finally catching up. For his part, Rei was still feeling to awkward to be around Shougo, so he actually found Shougo sleeping the day away something to be thankful for.

After finishing preparations, he headed for the front entrance—before wondering if he ought to let Shougo know where he was going. In the end, though, he told himself it would be best to just let him rest, and he exited the house and piled into the car, headed for Haneda Airport to pick up the Sena family.

It would be his first time seeing them in a while—Seiya, Nagisa, and Izumi as well. When he stopped to consider the trio, he found strange feelings bubbling up. He naturally felt worried about what might happen if they found out about him and Shougo, and of course the ever-present weighty, painful feelings of his unrequited love for Seiya remained, but along with these emotions was a sense of relief at finally being reunited with them, his heart warming...

It was something completely different from what he'd felt even with his biological mother. Just as strongly as he longed to stay by Seiya's side, he loved this family, reminding him of just how much he cherished this place he'd found with them.

'I don't want to leave the Senas...'

And gripping the steering wheel tightly, he headed for the airport. On arriving, he consulted a building map—as he wasn't quite familiar with the airport just yet—before heading to the arrivals lobby on the first floor. He still had a bit of time left before the family's flight was set to arrive, so he bought a drink and settled down on a bench to kill some time. As the arrival time approached, he glanced up at the arrivals board before heading for the exit he thought the trio would use.

"Rei!!" At length, an endearing voice that could have belonged to a boy soprano piped up, calling his name. As Rei turned to face the voice, Izumi darted forward, heading his way. Well aware of how clumsy Izumi could be and fearing that he might trip and fall, Rei quickly made his way over of his own accord, scooping Izumi into his arms as the boy launched himself forward.

"Welcome back, Izumi-san."

"I'm hoooooome~!" Rei smiled fondly at the brilliant grin Izumi flashed him. While the boy could be annoying with how clingy he was at times and drove Rei crazy with his spoiled tantrums, being bodily reminded of how thrilled Izumi was to see him after so long certainly wasn't bad.

However...

"Hi there, Rei-kun. Anything happen while we were gone?" The one Rei was most happy to see would *always* be Seiya, and he stood, shaking off the thrill that had run through him at hearing Seiya's voice for the first time in a while.

"Ah—well, Shougo-san has returned home."

"Oniichan's back??" His voice seemed to dance, and as Rei glanced down, he found Izumi flushing happily.

"Indeed he is," he affirmed with a nod, recalling now that Seiya had mentioned before that Izumi was terribly fond of his older brother.

"Yaaay yaaay!! Rei, let's hurry home then!!" he urged. He must *really* have been looking forward to seeing Shougo, and Rei supposed that despite his happy-go-lucky personality, Shougo must be a good big brother to Izumi.

"...Shougo didn't mention a word about coming home... Good grief, that boy's as carefree as ever!" Nagisa remarked, throwing Izumi a sidelong glance. Rei supposed it only stood to reason, given that she was an actress, but despite spending her vacation in the southern isles of Japan, she still had pale skin that looked as if she'd never seen the sun.

"Well, Shougo's a free-spirited boy," Seiya soothed, reaching an arm around to pat Nagisa's shoulder. It seemed neither of Shougo's parents

had expected his return either.

“Heeey, c’mon, Rei! Let’s gooo!”

Rei snapped back to his sense as Izumi tugged on his wrist. “Ah, yes of course.”

“Right—shall we head out?” Rei ducked a nod at Seiya’s suggestion, and with his hand still linked with Izumi’s, they made their way to the parking garage.

“When did Oniichan get back?”

“Yesterday.”

“How did he seem?”

At Seiya’s question, Rei groped for a response “Oh, uh...” How had he *seemed*? How was he supposed to answer that? Discussing what had happened between them was out of the question—but just as taboo was mentioning that he’d seemed like a flighty, devil-may-care, cocky twit.

“Did he seem like he was doing well? Though knowing him, I’m sure he is.” Rei could only nod in affirmation, grateful for the lifesaver Nagisa had just unwittingly thrown him.

“Ah—yes, yes he seemed well. Though he was still asleep when I left the house earlier.”

“I see.” Nagisa nodded uncommittally, but her expression betrayed a bit of relief, and for a moment, she seemed less confident actress and more worried mother. She may have expected him to be just fine, as she’d claimed, but it was clear she’d still been at least a little concerned.

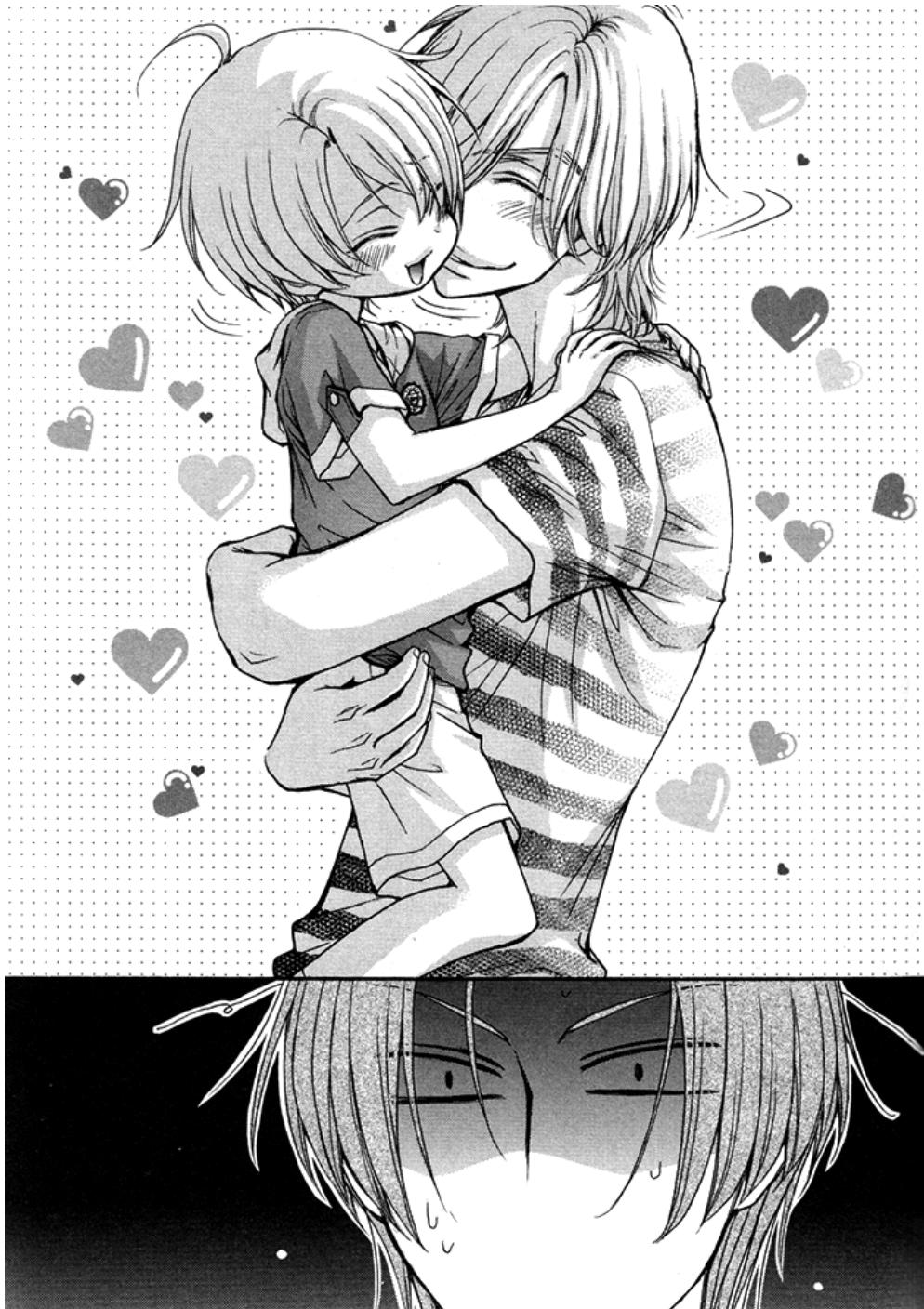
These thoughts drew Rei’s attention back to Shougo, and he swallowed a sigh. *‘I wonder if he’s really intending on keeping our secret...’* And with the same unease festering in his chest as when he’d driven here, he climbed into the cab of the car.

The moment they pulled into the drive, Izumi began wiggling in his seat, and as soon as Rei opened his door, he shot from the car, headed straight for the living room.

“*Oniiichaaaaan!!*”

At this cry, a sound of welcome akin to a *screech* sounded from within—it seemed Shougo was already in the living room. As Rei entered the living room behind Seiya and Nagisa, he found Izumi clutching Shougo in a tight hug.

“Izumi! How’ve you been?? Still as much a cutie-patootie as ever!” He returned Izumi’s hug tightly, sparing no expense in his fawning as he broke into a wide grin. Rei could do nothing more but stand there and gape in shock as the pair peppered each other’s cheeks with a hail of kisses and nuzzles.



'Wow...these two have *CRAZY* brother complexes...'

He'd heard that Izumi was fond of Shougo, and the display back at the airport had confirmed his suspicions, but he'd never expected *this*. Rei had no siblings of his own, but he was quite certain this was *not* typical fraternal behavior. And yet, Seiya and Nagisa seemed more than used to this sight.

"What brought you back home all of a sudden?" Nagisa prodded, seemingly unaffected by the display.

"Well, I'm on summer break right now, and a bunch of my friends went country-hopping, so I thought it was time I dropped by again!" Shougo replied with an easy smile, settling Izumi onto his lap.

Nagisa huffed a deep sigh at his cavalier response. "You really ought to let us know when you're coming home!" She then leveled a glare at Shougo. "You never contact us anymore while you're over there! At least call or drop a text message now and then!"

"C'mon, lack of any letters just means I'm doing great!" Shougo didn't seem all that cowed by Nagisa's anger; in fact, Izumi, still seated on his lap, seemed more on the verge of tears from the exchange.

“I’m sorry, Rei-kun.”

“Eh...?” Rei blinked several times at Seiya’s comment, having been distracted by the pair’s argument.

“Must have given you a start, having Shougo appear all of a sudden.”

“Oh—no, that’s...It’s quite all right.” His voice sounded shrill with nerves as his heart leaped in his chest. *‘Noooo no no, this isn’t good. Shougo’s doing a great job with playing it cool, so what good will it do me to screw this up now?’* he reminded himself firmly, then forced his strained features into a smile.

“Thanks for watching the house. The rooms look spotless.” With that, he favored Rei with a pat on the head.

“Oh—it was nothing at all...” But his cheeks relaxed at this first brush of contact in so long. In truth, he’d mostly only cleaned the rooms in an effort to cover up any evidence of what he’d done and as an act of atonement, but it still felt wonderful being praised by Seiya like this, and before he realized it, he was no longer wearing the forced grin from before, but a true, full-faced smile.

And then—

“—?”

He felt someone watching him, a gaze falling heavy over him—and turned to face the direction it was coming from. But all he saw was the living room, the same as it had ever been, with Nagisa still griping at Shougo, who was skillfully sidestepping her lectures, and Izumi—who’d been watching Nagisa with a tearful expression—still clinging tightly to Shougo with his back turned to everyone.

“...Just my imagination?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh—nothing, it’s nothing. Umm...shouldn’t we...stop them?” He jerked his head to indicate the mother-son pair.

“Ah, that’s just their way of communicating,” Seiya responded with a fond grin, and Rei nodded, still not entirely convinced but assuming this was just how things worked between them.

Nagisa’s lecturing continued on from there until Izumi finally broke into tears.

I wasn’t sure about how this would go at first, but...

Dinnertime this evening was fairly normal. The only major difference tonight was the fact that Izumi seemed to be in low spirits, his eyes puffy and red from crying—the reason for which was that he’d just learned that Shougo would be going back to school the next day.

It had been nearly a week since Shougo had come home, and while Rei had initially been on pins and needles, anxious that *maybe tonight* Shougo would come to him, intent on ‘collecting’, it seemed Shougo had plenty of friends around to keep himself occupied and would head out nearly every afternoon, hardly interacting with Rei at all.

Come evening, he could be found playing with Izumi and had even taken it upon himself to sleep with the boy, on top of it all. It almost seemed as if the whole affair would end without issue, and while he felt pity for Izumi, losing his brother again, he wouldn’t deny feeling relieved.

“So, have you decided what you want to do with your future yet, Shougo?” Seiya asked as the TV program he’d turned on (but not really bothered to watch) went to commercial.

Shougo paused with chopsticks in hand and cocked his head to the side in thought. “Mmm, not yet really. I’m at least gonna finish college over there, I think... I can probably skip a few grades and graduate early, that way.”

Rei hadn’t been paying much attention to the conversation—but his eyes flared wide with shock at the words *skip a few grades*. He wondered if he’d heard correctly, but it was hardly his place to butt into the conversation.

While he knew that some overseas institutions allowed such things as skipping grades, Rei was quite sure it was only allowed for students who’d demonstrated particular excellence...

Seiya sighed softly. “I see... So then I guess I’m right in assuming you still have no plans to enter the entertainment industry?”

“Nope; definitely not,” Shougo responded with a curt nod—an answer which came as quite a surprise to Rei. He didn’t want to offer the guy any undue praise, but anyone could see that Shougo’s outward appearance and voice were quite something. He had an aura about him that was even more ‘celebrity’ than some of the young entertainers gracing the television screen these days. There was no getting around admitting that this was what you could expect from the offspring of Seiya and Nagisa.

As such, Rei had been certain that, after graduation, Shougo would become an entertainer... But it seemed he was the only one shocked by this revelation, as Seiya donned a bitter smile and Nagisa huffed her displeasure next to him.

“I see...” His earlier words of *I guess I’m right in assuming* had been rather telling; they’d obviously had this conversation before. “Well, I certainly hope you find your dream soon.”

Rei found those words of Seiya's quite impactful. For Rei, who'd wasted his youth with no hopes or dreams, only finding something worth living for after he met Seiya—to work for Seiya by his side—it felt...strange, learning that Seiya's own son had no such dream of his own.

Then, after dinner, Nagisa headed for her bathroom to start her evening ablutions in preparation for the work she had the next day, and Shougo made an attempt to cheer up the still-sullen Izumi, leaving the living room with him and likely heading to Izumi's bedroom to turn in.

Rei found himself enjoying a rare after-dinner cup of tea alone with Seiya—their first in a while—and his heart danced with both nerves and joy at the opportunity. But in contrast to Rei's mood, Seiya seemed a bit down.

"Um, so...are you worried? About Shougo-san?" Shougo had a bad habit of forgetting to contact his family for long stretches at a time, so it stood to reason that Seiya might feel uneasy to see Shougo head back abroad for school.

"Hmm? Oh, well..." He allowed a wry smile. "He's a capable young man." Many might have taken the comment as nothing more than a father praising his son, but Rei didn't miss the strangely troubled expression that passed over Seiya's features. Unsure of how he ought to respond, Rei instead chose to remain silent, waiting for Seiya to continue. "Whether it's in his studies or sports—he's the type of boy who's able to handle anything reasonably well with only the slightest bit of effort. But that in turn...makes it hard for him to find something worth really *trying* for, it seems."

"Something...worth doing?"

— *I certainly hope you find your dream soon.*

The words Seiya had spoken over dinner bubbled up again in the back of Rei's mind.

"He's a fantastic singer, too. I'd be thrilled if he wanted to go professional, but...it seems he doesn't want to follow in his father's footsteps." Here, he smiled bitterly again, apparently having accepted that he had no choice in the matter. "Though I guess it's all a matter of feelings; if there's something else he truly wants to do other than music, then I wish him all the best of luck. I'm sure he'll succeed in whatever he sets his mind to... I guess that makes me sound like a doting father, huh?"

"Oh—no, not at all..." Rei frantically shook his head.

"Thanks—well, I'm going to head on up to bed. And—would you mind taking Shougo back to Narita tomorrow?"

"Ah—yes, of course. ...Good night." He watched Seiya exit the leaving room before releasing a soft sigh to himself. "...So the guy's a genius, huh..." If what Seiya had said was true...well, of *course* it had been true; this was Seiya, after all. Which meant Shougo hadn't been joking in his suggestion of skipping grades. Rei hadn't been expecting that at all, given how flighty Shougo had been in his manner of speaking.

What must it feel like...to be capable of everything—but to have no interest in anything? He couldn't wrap his mind around it, given that he'd had *nothing* himself, unable to do anything.

Still, having enviable talent and living in the lap of luxury with no financial troubles whatsoever—with the only problem being a lack of choice? There were worse ways to live.

That night

Rei woke with a start at the sound of his door opening in the middle of the night, and he groped along the sideboard to turn his lamp on.

"Since it's my last night here...I decided to drop by!"

Rei could only sigh with defeat at Shougo's proclamation, devoid of even a hint of remorse. He was hardly here to just '*drop by*', and hearing such a turn of phrase delivered by not a cute girl but a beautiful man such as Shougo left Rei feeling rather unsettled.

"...Everyone's here right now; we *can't*." There was no way he wouldn't be able to tell what Shougo had come here for, and he leveled a harsh glare at Shougo to press home the point.

"Sure we can, so long as you don't make any sound! Don't worry—I made sure everyone else was asleep."

"That's *not* the issue!"

"But I've done a good job keeping our secret! C'mon~! Don't I deserve at least a *little* reward?"

".....!" Rei bit back a response, unable to speak up in the face of the word *secret*. As Shougo professed, he had indeed played his part well over the past few days, until Rei could almost believe that nothing *had* happened between them. He'd been perfect, more than good enough to make a career as an actor.

But then, Shougo had never had anything to lose from making the promise in the first place. If Rei refused him now...

"And if you think you won't be able to control your voice, then all we have to do is stop it this!" Lost in his thoughts, Rei now glanced at the towel Shougo held out for him, eyes goggling.

"You—wait, don't tell me you plan to *gag* me?"

"Sure do! This way you won't have to worry~" Seeing Shougo grinning merrily at the prospect made Rei feel all the more foolish for worrying so seriously over the matter.

'Just what kind of kinks does this guy have?!" he wanted to snap, but refrained. His room was the only one on the third floor, at least; the only person who ever came up here was the housekeeper in the afternoons to air out his futon. So long as they didn't make any loud noises, they were unlikely to be heard. Plus, if he could just get through this night, then Shougo would be off overseas again, and peace would return at last. "...All right. Knock yourself out," he finally allowed with a sighing nod.

"Woohoo~!" And with an excited air that looked like he was *this* close to whistling happily, Shougo placed the towel over Rei's mouth, tying it tightly around the back of his head. "Does it hurt?"

"....." Rei shook his head at the question.

"Oh good! Then let's try this next..."

"Hnn??" Shougo next grabbed his arms, and Rei's eyes went wide—but before he could react, Shougo had pressed his wrists together and bound them securely before him. "—?!" He couldn't protest vocally, so he leveled a harsh glare at Shougo, his objections to the situation blatant in his gaze.

"Well just—I figured while I was at it, it might be fun to, y'know, enjoy a little bondage??" Despite the wording, though, Shougo's expression remained one of innocent interest, like a schoolboy who'd just gotten a new video game.

"....." Baffled by his attitude, Rei just sighed long-sufferingly from beneath the gag, reminded once again that sex really *was* just a form of casual communication to Shougo.

"All righty then, here we go~" And with that, he pressed Rei down onto his back on the bed, and Rei cocked his head to the side to avoid the discomfort caused by the gag's knot against his neck. Shougo took his bound wrists and pushed them up over his head. "Y'know...this way, it kinda feels like I'm doing something really evil..." He snickered as he said this, deftly undoing the buttons down the front of Rei's pajama shirt. Rei wasn't entirely thrilled with the idea of his hands being bound like this, but sensing that protesting further might actually make Shougo *happy*, he gave in and fell limp.

"You liked being touched here, didn't you?" He suckled light and quick on a nipple here, and Rei's shoulders jolted in response.

".....!"

Shougo tongued the nipple sharply, and Rei felt the burn of heat slowly flow through his body—which had found no release since that first afternoon with Shougo. He took the now hardened nub in his mouth and rolled it around, lightly grazing his teeth over it as he tugged gently.

"Nn...mm...!!" Rei's body twisted in response to the overwhelming stimulation.

"Did that hurt?" Rei responded with a faint nod, little more than a hint of movement from his chin—but Shougo simply crinkled his eyes in mirth, gently laving his tongue over the reddened nipple. "But look how turned on you're getting... See?" With the fingers of one hand, he teased the nipple—now slick with saliva—and then purposefully moved the knee he'd at one point slipped between Rei's legs. "You're already hard as a rock, after all...?"

Rei's eyes grew wide in shock—but he could feel that his cock had indeed hardened, given how close their bodies were just now, and his cheeks flared with shame.

"Hey—it's nothing to be embarrassed about? I mean, I'm really happy?"

"Mmf..." Now Shougo pressed a pecking kiss to the other nipple, finishing with a suckle. "Nngh..." In the same moment, he squeezed the first nipple with a tight pinch. "Nn—!" Rei's body trembled with each wriggling movement of tongue and finger, his legs spasming and heels kicking the mattress as if trying to bodily escape the pleasure. "Nnph...!?"

Shougo favored the hardened nub he'd been pinching with a light swipe of his tongue, and Rei unconsciously brought his thighs up alongside Shougo's body to pin him between Rei's legs—sending Shougo glancing up from his chest.

"Y'know, I've been wondering...if maybe you can get off just from having your nipples teased..."

".....!" Rei shook his head sharply at Shougo's curious pondering, as if to say *Of course I can't!*

"Hmm, you sure about that? Cause I think maybe you could... Though I dunno that I've got the self-control to wait for that tonight—so maybe next time?" Releasing his grip on Rei's wrists for restraint, he tugged down Rei's pajama pants and underwear. "Huh? Wow, you're leaking more than I expected..."

Rei bit down on his lip—just as Shougo had said, the tip of his now-exposed cock was indeed oozing.

"Want me to touch you?"

Rei very nearly shook his head in reflexive response—but on consideration, he gave a reluctant nod. He was in no mood to continue having

his nipples teased mercilessly, and this was the best he could do to ensure that this whole mess ended as quickly as possible.

“Then allow me~” With this, he brushed his fingers just along the base.

“Nngh—!” His fingers quickly curled around the shaft in a firm grip, slowly sliding upward toward the tip, and after a few practiced strokes, Rei’s hips began thrusting in time.

“Does that feel good?”

“Mmf...ugh...” He just clenched his eyes shut without reply.

“Well, I guess I can figure that out for myself.”

“Mmm—ngh...!” Rei’s eyes popped open at the sudden, unexpected sensation of something wet on him, and he glanced down just in time to see Shougo take his hardened length into his mouth. With a slick sound, he suckled on the tip, using his lips to keep a tight seal as Rei’s hips trembled beneath him.

He’d *never* expected Shougo to do something like this—hadn’t he just said before that it was his first time having sex with another man? How could he do something like *this* without an ounce of hesitation?

“Mmf...hng...—!” Shougo slid his tongue along the tip, probing gently, and the stimulation was more than enough to send Rei, already close to climax, past the breaking point. As he collapsed back to the bed, breath coming out in ragged heaves, Shougo cleanly flipped him over onto his stomach and stuffed a pillow beneath him. He then proceeded to spread apart the cheeks of Rei’s ass as it sat there before him, raised in the air. “Hng—mmf...” While Rei was still struggling to catch his breath from just orgasming, Shougo slid a finger inside.

“Man, you sure are tight... Wait, have you not gotten yourself off since then?”

“Hmmf...ugh...” The fingers wiggled within him, probing deeper—but there was no pain. Far from it, shudders of pleasure shot up his spine with each pass the fingers made over his prostate, and he could feel himself spreading open further.

“Oh—right right, almost forgot...”

“...Nnn? Hn—mm?!” He felt something cool slip between his legs, eyes flaring wide.

“Lotion! I heard it feels better if you use this, so I made sure to get some.” As he scissored his fingers in and out now, a disgusting *schlorping* sound now joined the fray. With the aid of the lotion now, though, Shougo pressed in more fingers, and Rei’s thighs shuddered violently as he was worked feverishly from the inside.

“Hnnf...mngh—!” But just as he felt himself about to collapse, his thighs no longer able to offer adequate support, Shougo slipped an arm under his hips to keep him up. He felt his body dissolving away beneath the onslaught of pleasure into a mass of liquid, just like the lotion.

“Looks like you’re just about ready now...” he remarked, and he removed his fingers before instantly replacing them with the head of his cock.

“Nngh...Hnn...—!”

Shougo slid in agonizingly slowly, and when he’d finally buried himself to the hilt, draped across Rei’s back, he began to jerk his hips with gentle, probing thrusts.

“Fmm—ungh...” The movements were languid and shallow, but the generous application of lotion produced a lurid cacophony, shameful in its sound.

“It really feels absolutely amazing inside you, Rei...” Rei mentally begged him not to say such things but remained silent, gritting his teeth. But then— “But I bet you’d *really* like me to hit *that* spot, huh?”

And with that, he snapped his hips forward sharply. “*Hnngh—!* Mmn—!!” If he hadn’t been gagged with the towel, Rei would have undoubtedly let loose a loud shout in that moment. Shougo’s thrusts had now shifted from the earlier deep but gentle rocking to long thrusts that pulled his cock nearly all the way out before charging back in, brushing mercilessly over Rei’s prostate. “Nngh—...!” It eventually became too much to bear, and without his cock being so much as *poked*, Rei found his release for a second time.

“Ssshhit...your insides...are really moving...” Shougo sounded utterly aroused and astounded, but there was nothing Rei could do about it.

The overwhelming pleasure had deprived him of any control over his body, still on edge and sensitive from just climaxing, and he found himself forgetting that he was supposed to be trying to stay quiet. Granted, most of the sounds had been muffled by the towel, but he couldn’t fight back the moans and whining that had escaped through his nose.

“Nnn...!! ...Mmf...—”

At length, he felt the sensation of Shougo finding his own release within him, and his body shuddered violently in response. As Shougo slowly pulled out, Rei felt the last of his strength leave him, his knees finally giving out, and he fell onto the sheets in slumber...

The following day, as requested by Seiya, Rei drove Shougo to Narita Airport. Given that this was on the heels of their night together the previous evening, it was still rather awkward being around Shougo—but it was far better than being in such a position with Seiya. If Rei had had to be alone with Seiya just now...he probably wouldn't have been able to even look him in the eye.

Knowing that he'd have a bit of time to himself once he dropped off Shougo, he decided to use that time to get his thoughts in order.

Which reminded him...

Rei glanced over at Shougo walking just diagonally ahead of him as they headed for the escalators that led up to the departure lounge. If he had to put his finger on it...the guy seemed a little *off* today somehow. He'd shed tears of his own in response to Izumi's wailing that morning, so perhaps he was just feeling a bit on-edge at leaving Japan again?

“...Though he doesn't really seem the type, I guess.”

“Hm? What's that?”

Rei frantically shook his head as Shougo peeked over to look him in the eye. “N—nothing!” It seemed they'd arrived before the elevators without Rei noticing. Now he could *finally* be relieved of this burden, he remarked to himself mentally—but Shougo wasn't facing the escalators, having drawn to a stop. “...What?”

Shougo was acting strangely, still peering into his face with no apparently intent to glance away, and Rei bunched his brows together. Shortly, Shougo spoke, “...Hey...smile like you do around my dad.”

“Huh?” Rei blinked several times at the unexpected request. He wanted Rei...to *smile*? “And why should I do that?” Admittedly, he would have been glad to send Shougo off with a blinding full-faced grin, so thrilled was he to finally be rid of him. But when Shougo asked like *that*, given everything that had passed between them, it only left Rei wondering *Why should I do that for him?*

Besides—smile like he did for Seiya? It didn't make sense. Yes, he loved Seiya, so he probably spent more time smiling around Seiya than he did around anyone else, but he'd never really noticed it.

“You know...I think I still don't really get what it means to be in love with someone...” Shougo sighed in response to Rei's question, whose expression now was far from a smile—more of a *frown*, in fact—and Rei blinked in shock at the ridiculous comment. “I dunno, maybe it's cause I always start off with the physical stuff? I've never felt like I want to have sex with someone or be around them because I *love* them. I've never gotten really serious or obsessive over any one special person, never felt like *I've gotta have them*.”

At Shougo's confession, Rei couldn't help recalling the conversation he'd had with Seiya the night before. About how Shougo could do *anything*—and how that conversely meant that he couldn't find anything worth putting effort into. He hadn't been talking just about Shougo's dreams or goals—but about how he interacted with people, too.

Shougo had talent, money, and a life of luxury. But nothing that he really wanted to do. No one that he really wanted to be with.

...Why was that?

He and Shougo should have logically been in completely opposite positions—and yet he couldn't help recalling here...how he'd felt when he'd met Seiya that Christmas Eve, how despite finally landing the windfall he'd always hoped to get, he still couldn't think of anything he wanted.

He'd thought Shougo blessed the night before...but now he wasn't so sure. All the money in the world didn't mean a thing if you had nothing that you truly desired. If you didn't have something you loved doing, or a person you loved being with—then money and good looks and smarts and social standing...lost all worth.

“I'm thinking that...being in love with someone—it's probably different from how adorable I think Izumi is, huh?”

Maybe it was thoughts like this...that had him thinking that he kind of—just a tiny bit—felt sorry for Shougo.

“...Yeah, it's different.”

Shougo allowed a bitter smile to cross his lips as Rei nodded, as if he'd expected this response. “You get this...really beautiful smile on your face when you're around my dad. I guess that shows how much you love him, huh?”

“I'm...afraid I don't really know, myself.”

“Aww c'mon, no need to be shy about it~” Rei truly hadn't realized, so he hadn't been lying or covering anything up, but Shougo hadn't taken it that way, apparently, and flashed his usual goofy grin once again. “...I dunno, I just thought...it was kind of nice. Anyway, bye!”

“Eh—? Hey, wai—...“ Rei called him back reflexively in response to the unexpected comment, but Shougo had already turned on his heel and mounted the escalator stairs, giving no sign of turning back. “...What the heck was that?” He blinked in confusion for a few moments, standing where he stood. But the moment he could no longer see Shougo, a relieved sigh bubbled up. “Well, whatever!”

All that mattered now was that he would finally have some peace and quiet for a while. From what he'd heard, Shougo had been out of contact for close to a year before coming home out of the blue as he had just now. Which meant he'd have at least another year or so of peaceful days ahead of him. He'd finally be able to get a good night's rest once more, and with such happy thoughts filling his head, Rei headed home.

However, as if laughing in the face of Rei's suppositions, for some reason Shougo showed up once more at his parents' home for the New Year's holidays that year—and after spending a pleasant break with his parents and hitting up Rei for several rounds of sex, he left again. Granted, while only a few months had passed since his previous visit, it *had* been the end of the year, and so Rei had supposed that it was hardly unnatural for a son to visit around those holidays, passing Shougo's homecoming off as nothing more than just that.

Except he came home again for Spring Break.

And again for Summer Break. And then again the *following* New Year's.

"Shougo's been coming home to visit every chance he gets lately, huh..."

"Yup, he even said he's coming again on his next break!" Izumi pronounced cheerfully to Nagisa, who seemed relieved but still a bit confused by the situation herself. Izumi himself was over the moon with joy that his beloved big brother was coming home so often now. He was often left feeling rather down in the few days following Shougo's eventual return to England, but it never lasted all that long, and as soon as Shougo showed his face again, he'd be off chattering about what all had happened in his absence.

And of course Nagisa as well as Seiya were thrilled that their son was visiting home so often. However...

Whereas the Sena family was in high spirits about the whole situation—Rei couldn't seem to stay calm. How *could* he, after all? He still cared greatly for Seiya, but every time Shougo popped in, they'd slip off for a secret sexual rendezvous... Rei was only going along with everything to ensure that Shougo didn't spill about their relationship to Seiya—but at the rate things were going, there was no way things weren't going to come apart at the seams at the *worst* possible moment now.

While he knew he ought to be thinking of a way *out* of the situation, though, he reluctantly continued to allow the relationship to continue. Until—

Shougo came home during Spring Break once again. "Good grief—why must you come home *every single chance you get*? You were perfectly content only coming back once a year before." He muttered these complaints while unthinkingly helping Shougo strip him.

He understood well enough that he, as a houseguest, had no place complaining while the family were all so happy with the situation—but the lapse in time between New Year's and Spring Break had felt far too short, and the bitter complaint just leaked out.

"Mm, well—sex with you feels *way* better than with anyone else, so I just find myself dropping in whenever I find the time!"

Rei felt a wave of exhaustion wash over him at the cheerful proclamation, delivered with a smile. It was times like this that left Rei *certain* this man never thought anything through. Though, Rei had to admit, sex with Shougo was the best he'd ever had as well...

Not that he planned on *ever* letting Shougo know that himself.

"...Whatever, let's just get this over with."

"There you go again~" Shougo teased, letting a hand slide down to massage Rei's shoulder as he slowly drew in close, and Rei's eyes slipped shut as he accepted the kiss, responding to it.

"Mm..." Heat flared up slowly at the touch, and a moan slipped out as they kissed. His tongue entwined eagerly with Shougo's own as it slid into his mouth. As they exchanged kisses, Shougo's hand dropped down to further explore Rei's body, drifting over his most erogenous points, then to the areas teasingly close—until falling further away...

He tweaked Rei's nipple with one hand while stroking his side with another, sending a shudder of pleasure through Rei's body. Shougo gently pressed him down onto his back on the bed, breaking the kiss only long enough to strip Rei's shirt off over his head. As their bare chests brushed together, Shougo nipped lightly at Rei's earlobe.

"Nngh..." The lips soon descended in a line down his throat, with his hand coming up to palm between Rei's legs—and then it happened. "—w-wait..."

"Hey—what's the big idea, all of a sudden...?"

"Just shut up—I heard something." He thought he'd heard a sound—something *not* roused by their own actions, and he shoved Shougo up off of himself. He strained to hear over the sounds of his own heart thudding loudly in his chest, and then—

"...-chan...Oniichaaaan...where are you..."



There was no mistaking it—that was Izumi's voice. Something must have woken him, and seeing that Shougo—who was supposed to be sleeping with him—was not by his side, he'd probably come looking for him. Thankfully, he didn't hear any other sounds, but if they let him wander about crying as he was, it was only a matter of time before Seiya and Nagisa woke as well.

"Hurry and get dressed and go see to him!" Rei urged, tossing Shougo's clothes at him. They hadn't yet managed to divest themselves of anything below the waist, so it didn't take too long. Shougo must have felt the same sense of urgency as Rei, for he quickly dressed without protest and slipped out of the room.

Rei strained to hear, not daring to move a muscle, until he caught the sounds of Shougo descending the stairs. His heart was thudding so loudly, he was sure that anyone wandering by might be able to hear it and clasped a hand to his chest.

"What's wrong, Izumi?"

"Oniichaan! Where'd you go??"

"Sorry! Was just getting some air out on the third-floor balcony!"

Their voices grew fainter and fainter, until at last Rei couldn't hear them at all. They must have finally retired once again to Izumi's room,

and as a sense of relief dawned, Rei wiped away the sheen of cold sweat from his face, but his heart continued to pound.

The hand he'd clenched to his chest trembled nervously, and he was sure if he looked into a mirror just now, his face would be as pale as if he'd just seen a ghost. He dove under his futon and covered up to his head, curling in on himself into a tight ball.

And as he listened to the sounds of his own labored breathing, he finally made a firm decision.

The next day, he knocked on the door of Shougo's room. Seiya and Nagisa were both out taking care of their respective work, and Izumi was at school. The housekeeper was gone as well, as after she'd prepared lunch for all but Shougo, she'd headed out to do some shopping for dinner—which meant she wouldn't be back for another hour at least.

This was the only chance he had to really *talk*. He'd wanted to wait until the evening, but Shougo generally slept with Izumi, and he absolutely did *not* want a repeat of the previous night.

“*Come in~*” At the invitation from inside, Rei took a deep breath and opened the door. “...Huh? Wow, it's rare for you to come visit me!” He likely had thought Rei the housekeeper, come to collect his laundry, and his eyes were wide with surprise as he sat up from where he lay lounging on his bed—not sleeping, but reading magazines apparently, based on the publications strewn about over his pillow.

Rei swallowed thickly. He knew he'd made his decision, but now that the moment had arrived to *say it*, he didn't know how to broach the subject. Until—

“What's wrong? Oh—you wanna continue what we started last night?” The moment Shougo opened his mouth and delivered the question, all casual and unruffled, Rei felt his will firm, and he stared straight at Shougo.

“...Please don't make me do this anymore,” he voiced, facing Shougo. “I don't want to risk what I have here—if anyone found out...my life would be *over*. Please understand. I'm sure you...have any number of other partners you could turn to, right?”

No...that wasn't right, and he shook his head after allowing himself to speak too emotionally, lashing out at Shougo. This was *his own* fault as well. He'd told himself the reason he'd allowed this relationship to continue as long as it had was because he needed insurance to keep Shougo quiet; he was as much at fault for not nipping this in the bud to begin with.

Of course, it hadn't been an excuse in the beginning—he truly *had* believed this to be the only way to ensure Shougo wouldn't talk. But now, after spending as much time with Shougo as he had, he could tell—*believed*—that Shougo wasn't the type of person who would callously reveal their relationship or Rei's feelings for Seiya. Even if Rei hadn't given in that first time, if he'd pushed Shougo away, he surely wouldn't have retaliated.

The fact that he'd continued dragging out this relationship, giving in to Shougo's desire despite understanding that he wouldn't do anything if Rei refused...was, he supposed, simply because of Rei's own innate weakness. Living his life clinging to these feelings for Seiya that would never, *ever* bear fruit had always been so *frustrating*, and sex with Shougo had truly felt *amazing*...so he supposed he'd just been putting off the inevitable.

He knew that he should have done something before things escalated to what had happened the night before. Seiya and SenaPro were the most important things in Rei's life.

“I was wrong—I can't lose my dream, my *life*...just for a few hours' pleasure with you.”

And maybe Shougo understood now...how serious Rei was. “I see... Your dream, huh,” he allowed with a sigh, having kept silent through Rei's speech, and then nodded shortly. “All right; guess there's nothing we can really do about it. This only works if we both agree to it, after all.” He slipped off the bed here and strode forward to stand before Rei. “Guess that's the end of our secret alliance.”

Rei glanced down at the hand Shougo held out for him—switching his glance back and forth between Shougo's face and hand. Shougo reached forward and took Rei's hand in his own, squeezing it tightly—and it was only here that Rei realized *Shougo was shaking his hand*. His palm felt warm, and Rei realized that his own fingers had been frozen with nerves.

Rei returned the firm grip, glancing up at Shougo—realizing for the first time that Shougo was taller than him now, had passed him in height without Rei even realizing it. Quite some time had passed now since they'd first met—and this difference pressed that point home.

“...A ‘secret alliance’? Are you an idiot?” He knew he really ought to be thanking Shougo for agreeing so easily to dissolve their relationship, but he couldn't help the nasty quip, and Shougo released his grip with a goofy smile.

And so, their relationship ended just as secretly as it had begun, and without even waiting for his Spring Break to end this time, Shougo returned to England.

But ending his relationship with Shougo was not the only thing Rei had decided upon.

“You...want to leave? Are you serious?”

After Shougo had returned to England, Rei waited a bit for Izumi to recover his good spirits before informing Seiya of his intentions to leave the Sena family home and live on his own, announcing his plans after dinner, as the family sat around enjoying a cup of tea.

“Yes. I realize it's quite rude a request, after I've spent all this time in your care, but...” Over the course of his relationship with Shougo,

several years had now passed since he'd entered the employ of SenaPro. He'd put nearly his entire salary into savings, so he had quite a nest egg saved up, and it just wasn't a good idea—for a number of reasons—to live under the same roof as someone he had untoward feelings for. That had been part of what had caused him to take up with Shougo in the first place, after all.

But the one who most objected to his decision turned out to be Izumi. "Rei...you're gonna leave us?"

"Well, yes, that was my intent—" he began, but before he could finish, Izumi's eyes welled up with tears, spilling their banks.

"I don't want you to gooo!!"

"E—Eh?! I—Izumi-san?!"

"Y—you said y—you would stay here...forever...and ever! You *promised*...!"

Rei couldn't help the upwelling of affection he felt at Izumi's passionate wailing against his leaving.

"My my, Izumi certainly does seem to be fond of you, Rei-kun," Seiya observed, soothing Izumi. He patted him gently on the head, and at length, Izumi's crying began to lose power. However... "But I have to agree that I'm going to be sad to see you go as well... Though naturally, it's hardly my place to keep you from doing so, and I have no intention of it either... But, do you *have* to leave?" Seiya tried, once more, to prompt Rei to change his mind.

But Rei was resolved to go through with this and gave a small but firm nod. "...I'm sorry."

"Oh come now, there's no need to apologize!" Nagisa reassured as Rei bowed his head. "You're an adult now, so it's only natural you'd want a bit of space to yourself. I'm sure I'll be a bit put out not being able to see your face whenever I like, but it's not as if you're intending on quitting working with us, right?"

"Oh—no, of course not!" He couldn't fathom the idea of separating himself from Seiya and SenaPro entirely. Far from it—this move would ensure that he could stay by Seiya's side from now on. "Naturally, I would love to be able to continue with my work, as usual. That's why I plan on finding someplace from which I can commute here by foot."

"Is that so?"

"Yes!" At this response, Seiya nodded as if to say *Well in that case...*, giving his tacit agreement.

"Rei, you're gonna come here every day still?"

"Indeed I shall." And Izumi finally stopped his sniffling, apparently happy with this.

"Yes, I suppose since you're of an age, it's important that you have a place to call your own, huh." And while it honestly hurt a little, having Seiya mistake his reason for putting space between the two of them like that, he had no reason to refute. If this reasoning satisfied Seiya, then so be it. "You said you wanted to be close enough to walk to work—have you already picked out a place?"

"Ah, yes. It's not decided quite yet, but I've got my eye on a place..."

"Got any papers on it?"

"Yes, I'll fetch them!" He slipped back to his room here, grabbing the info packet and paper showing the apartment's layout, passing it to Seiya.

"Hmm...this won't do..."

"Eh...?" Rei blinked widely at the unexpectedly serious comment. "It's...no good?" It was a 6-mat single-room apartment without a bath, but it would only cost 40,000 yen a month—a steal. It had reminded him of the apartment he'd shared with his mother in the past, so he'd thought it was quite a reasonable place, but...

"All right, that settles it! I won't stop you from living on your own, but seeing as you're one of our employees, we'll make whatever building you decide on into the SenaPro bachelor dorms!"

"E—eh?! B—but you can't...!"

"If you can't swallow that, then I'm not letting you leave." And right after he'd *just* claimed he wouldn't stand in Rei's way... But Rei could hardly complain and was, in the end, forced to accept Seiya's condition.

To top it all off, the building Seiya signed the contract on mere days later...was newly erected building, with each room fitted with separate baths/toilets, air-conditioning/heating units, and an auto lock system—only a five-minute walk from the Sena family home. With this, Rei was reminded once more that he couldn't begin to thank Seiya enough.

It was about a week after Golden Week ended, a fine day in May, and Rei was heating water in the new apartment he'd finally started to settle into. He'd thought to take a break after work, and while he'd already had dinner, it was an unshakable habit of his since his life with the Senas to enjoy something warm to drink in the evening. Though lately, he'd been so busy with work, he hadn't had the time to indulge.

Ever since starting to live on his own, Rei had begun to well and truly sink his teeth into things as the Manager for SenaPro, doing all he could to find Seiya jobs that would help him even just a little bit—jobs that would make SenaPro bigger and better than ever. With this goal in mind, Rei—and SenaPro as well—had begun to move forward bit by bit.

But he still harbored a few small worries—one of which was the fact that there were no clear successors to Seiya and Nagisa showing themselves. And given the pair's innate talents and luck, Rei's diligent efforts alone would likely not bear fruit in this respect. Though naturally, he was doing his very best, but still...

And the other worry...was that several benign polyps had been detected in Seiya's throat recently, which meant his throat wasn't doing too well. As the surgery to remove them would be performed on a rather delicate part of his body, Seiya himself was hesitating as to whether or not to go through with the surgery.

"Shougo...huh..." Rei murmured to himself with a sigh.

Sena Shougo. It was a name that came saddled with quite a lot of complicated feelings for Rei—and not exactly ones he really wanted to think about. But Seiya had thrown about the name rather often of late, waxing wistful with comments like *Sure would be nice if Shougo would join SenaPro...*

It probably had to do with the polyp diagnosis, as Seiya must surely have seen Shougo as the ideal candidate to succeed him in heading the company—and Rei couldn't really blame him. Anyone could see that Shougo clearly had the means to make it in the entertainment industry, after all. Even Rei, who'd been keeping an eye out for any rising stars who might be able to succeed Seiya, could plainly see that the aura Shougo kept about himself far surpassed that of these amateurs.

"But be that as it may..." His relationship with Shougo had ended with him shoving Shougo away. They hadn't even been in contact since then—there was no way he could ask Shougo to sign with SenaPro. Though if worse came to worse...he probably wouldn't have the luxury of hesitating on this point.

He sighed again, at a loss as to what to do, and turned off the burner—when the intercom buzzed. Rei cocked his head in confusion; it was past 9 PM, and he certainly wasn't expecting any visitors. As he approached the video phone, curious, he answered and got the shock of his life, as there reflected on the monitor was Shougo.

He wondered for a moment if he was seeing things—before realizing that no, there was no mistake. Golden Week had long since ended—so what was Shougo doing here? Oh, but—he supposed they didn't have Golden Week in England in the first place, so that hardly mattered. Which still left the question of *why was Shougo here?*

"What's the matter with you? What're you doing in Japan?"

At his question, Shougo peered into the camera with a gaze that made one wonder if it really was impossible to see through the video screen. *"I had something I absolutely had to talk to you about, so I came back."*

"Talk to me about...?"

"Yeah—so, let me in? I swear I won't do anything you don't want me to."

At this, Rei noted that his manner of speaking seemed much more serious than usual. "...All right." And trusting that Shougo would keep his word not to do anything Rei didn't approve, he pressed the button to buzz him inside. After only a moment, the doorbell rang, and Rei opened the door, inviting Shougo inside. "How did you know where I was?"

"You weren't there when I went to my folks' place, so I asked Izumi." He then fell silent, making his usual carefree attitude seem like a dream.

Rei was lost as to how to respond and instead poured two cups of the tea he'd been preparing for himself, settling down before his low table. "Well, at least sit down for now." Shougo nodded, taking a seat on the rug at length. "...So? What was it you wanted to speak to me about?"

"Right..." He seemed to fumble for words, very unlike the Shougo Rei knew, but he quickly firmed his will and raised his head, speaking at last. And the words that fell from his lips...were ones Rei had never expected to hear: "I tried sleeping with other people—but it just didn't work. No matter who I was with, I always wound up thinking about you. My head is full of *you*, and I don't know what to do!"

Rei felt his world tilt on its axis, completely thrown by the unexpected confession.

'...Oh shit. This is terrible.'

"I can't have anyone else but *you*... Hey, Rei? Do you know what this is? Why can I only think about you?"



"Don't ask me that..." Rei grumbled with a sigh—wishing desperately that Shougo hadn't brought this up in the first place, but Shougo

continued on.

“Is this...love? Am I in love with you?”

“*Stop*,” Rei snapped without answering the question, putting his foot down. It was the only thing he could do at this point. “You *know* I’m in love with Seiya-san! Not you! So even if you claim to be in love with me, I can’t return those feelings.” At Rei’s shut-out, Shougo drooped, falling silent again.

And then... “You know my dad loves my mom. So...still?”

“Yes. Despite that.”

“Even though you know he’ll never love you back?”

“Even then.” He hardly needed *Shougo* to tell him that, after all; he knew that better than anyone else. He was who he was today precisely because he understood this and still wanted to be by Seiya’s side forever. Though—it still pained him, and he felt a wave of irritation with Shougo for asking such questions in the first place rise up.

“You know...I’m the one who most resembles my dad...”

The comment pushed Rei into retorting with something he probably shouldn’t have: “No matter how alike you may look, you aren’t him.” Did Shougo still not *get it*? It mattered nothing how much they resembled one another; there was no *point* if he couldn’t have the person he wanted... “Plus—you’re only alike on the outside. You’re not as honest as he is, and you can’t sing the beautiful songs that he can!” That heart, that voice...that saved him that winter night. *No one* could replace that. But— “So, I cannot return your—” —*feelings*, he’d been about to repeat, when Shougo interrupted him.

“Then—what if I can surpass my father?”

“Huh...?” Rei blinked in confusion at the unexpected suggestion. Shougo...surpassing Seiya?

“If I come back here an even more amazing man than my father, will you think about me, and not him?”

Rei could only assume that Shougo *still* did not truly understand what it meant to love someone. It was the only reason he could possibly have for saying things like *I can’t be without you* and *I hope you’ll think about me if I surpass him* in the same breath.

But just as Rei was about to explain that it wasn’t an issue of *surpassing* anyone, he remembered something.

’Wait...Seiya wants Shougo to join the entertainment industry...’

His heart skipped a beat, pulsing stronger in his chest. This could be his *chance* a voice whispered deep inside his ear. “...When you say you’ll surpass Seiya-san...you mean you’ll sing?”

“Sure! I’ll do anything and everything!” he responded instantly with a nod, not seeming to notice the slight tremble in Rei’s voice.

And here, Rei made his decision. “...All right then. If you can manage it...then I’ll think it over.”

“Seriously!?” Shougo’s expression brightened.

He ignored the twinge of guilt blossoming in his chest at using Shougo’s feelings for him for the good of SenaPro and Seiya, nodding. “Sure.”

“All right—then it’s a promise! Pinky swear!” He snatched up Rei’s pinky in his own to seal the deal before darting out of the apartment in high spirits. “Just you watch, Rei! I’m gonna make it big!”

And with that, he left.

“Good morning.”

“Morning, Rei-kun.”

The next day, when Rei went to pick up Seiya as usual, he found the man in a rather good mood, smiling more broadly than usual. Nagisa and Izumi were already gone from the living room, as was Shougo, whom Rei had been harboring uncomfortable fears of running into. Relieved at the turn of events, he began to go over the day’s schedule with Seiya, as per usual—but Seiya’s smile didn’t leave his face.

“That reminds me—what’s going on with you this morning? Did something good happen?”

“Mm? Oh well you see...” At this, Seiya explained that Shougo had come to him the previous evening, vowing to set off on a journey of studies to become an even greater singer than his father.

“I...I see...” He hadn’t expected Shougo to go running off to make such an announcement to Seiya immediately after leaving Rei’s apartment, and while he worried that perhaps he’d let something suspicious slip in his excitement, Seiya’s expression reflected only joy. Which meant they were probably safe.

“Kept going on about having finally found his dream—that Shougo, who’s always seemed so bored with everything he did, was practically dazzling!”

“Is that so...?”

“He said he doesn’t plan on coming back home until he’s succeeded—even dropping out of school, which didn’t go over too well with Nagisa...but I must say I’m thrilled.”

And seeing how genuinely happy Seiya seemed with how things were going...made Rei happy as well. It was a bit worrisome that Shougo wouldn’t be coming home again until he’d succeeded, but just as Seiya believed: it was Shougo, so he’d be able to generate results.

“Well that’s wonderful.”

“Yup, wonderful indeed!” Seiya nodded with a broad grin. “Shougo will pull it off, no doubt. And I...I’ve decided to go through with the surgery for my polyps.”

“Ah—you have?” Now *that* was certainly something he hadn’t expected, given how worried Seiya had seemed over the matter... It seemed that having a successor now was helping things move in the right direction. After all, in one evening, he’d managed to resolve both of the worries that had been plaguing him lately. With this, SenaPro would likely grow larger and larger and move on to bigger and better projects.

“I’m sorry to have worried you, Rei-kun.”

“Oh—no, not at all. I’m...really glad.” He favored Seiya with a bright smile.

...It was three years after Shougo disappeared, then, that Rei began to hear rumors about a legendary indie band called the CRUSHERZ that had filled the Budoukan Hall to capacity.

THE END

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See Also...

Be sure to check out the sequel, Volumes 2!